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**More-than-human cohabitation: gentrification, displacement  
and belonging**

*Diploma Thesis*

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“I declare that I wrote the thesis independently using the sources dutifully cited and listed in the bibliography. The thesis was not used to obtain a different or the same title.”

“I agree the diploma thesis will be published in the electronic library of the Faculty of Humanities of Charles University and can be used as a study text.”

Prague, June 28, 2023 ..... Linda Dedkova

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I would like to note that my personal pronouns are they/them. Thank you for respecting my gender identity when referring to this text.

## **Abstract**

This thesis examines displacement and gentrification, using the example of the department store Karstadt at Hermannplatz in Berlin. The ecofeminist critique of the binary division between nature and culture is central to my argument that gentrification and displacement are influenced by complex natural-cultural processes. The thesis utilizes a combination of ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and affective reading of historical materials to investigate the historical interlinks between the construction of the Karstadt department store in the 1920s and the present-day situation. I argue that gentrification surpasses the architectural and demographic transformation of a neighborhood and is often rooted in intersectional oppression. Furthermore, displacement encompasses intricate more-than-human relations and processes, such as ways of shopping, and destroys complex local ecologies. Lastly, the agency of materials has a direct influence on the transformation of neighborhoods. The findings demonstrate that non-human agents can play crucial and dynamic roles in the interconnected economic, cultural, and ecological processes that facilitate gentrification.

**Key words:** more-than-human relationships, gentrification, belonging, displacement, naturecultures, department store, queer ecology

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## INTRODUCTION

I often think about space in relation to my everyday life, as it fundamentally affects my experience of living in a big city. In 2015 I moved to Berlin and found a small apartment in the so-called Kreuzkölln, rapidly gentrifying neighbourhood, increasingly inhabited by educated, young, alternative-minded “expats”. This diverse area lies in the southern part of Berlin, largely inhabited by people with a migration history (especially the Middle-Eastern diaspora) in the former West Berlin.

Hermannplatz (Image 1), a medium-sized square and my subway station right at the border between the neighbourhoods of Kreuzberg and Neukölln, is for me a space where ethnic, capitalist and post-colonial aspects of metropolitan life intersect. The square is an important gathering place and a frequent starting point for pro-Palestinian protests as well as other decolonial protests, such as the international queer pride. It is a busy traffic hub where a large number of homeless people spend their time and a place known for street drug consumption. Right next to Hermannplatz, there is Lucy-Lameck Street which was renamed after a Tanzanian politician in 2021 following incessant efforts of AfroGerman activism and where a lot of queer-pan-African events are held in the intercultural centre. Further down is Hasenheide, a large park built from the ruins of the bombed-out buildings after the Second World War, with a petting zoo and vast green spaces that have gained a reputation for queer cruising. The intensity of Hermannplatz rarely allows me to pass by unaffected, even though I pass through it daily. It is a place that anchors me, along with the estimated 160 other Neukölln nationalities (Neukölln, 2023) in my neighbourhood, co-shapes my identity, and fuels my ambivalence about living in this place at this time.

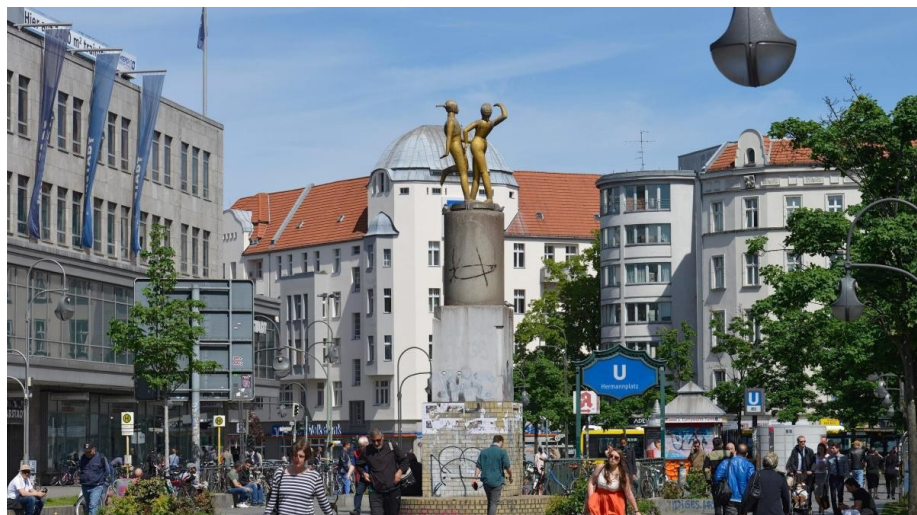


Image 1: Hermannplatz, Karstadt on the left. Source: Lindemann (2019)

The image of the square is dominated by the panorama of Karstadt, one of the most striking buildings built in Berlin before the First World War. Karstadt at Hermannplatz was designed by the architect Philipp Schäfer. Karstadt, and its affective symbolism, was supposed to represent a “New gateway to the global city Berlin”. The building was 32 metres tall with two towers of 4 stories. It was a landmark of Southwest Berlin, with a direct metro station in the mall, something that even New York did not have at the time.

Opened in 1929 as Europe's largest department store, it had its own subway station integrated within the department store. Designed in art deco style, the building was decorated with two twin towers, reminiscent of a Manhattan skyscraper. WW2 bombings left little of its original splendour intact, but the building was promptly rebuilt, albeit in a more modest form. Until today, it has remained a popular Berlin shopping destination. With its emblematic terrace and café on the top floor, the building provides both significant possibilities of leisure as well as shopping for the inhabitants of Neukölln and Kreuzberg, and neighbouring areas. In 2019, the SIGNA Group, the current owner Karstadt owner, decided to restore the Hermannplatz Karstadt building back to its original 1929 architecture.

Several years ago, I noticed a flyer depicting the building of the department store at Hermannplatz on my house door. The flyer with the letters “*Nicht ohne uns*” (Not without us) was a call to action against the closing of Karstadt (later referred to only as “Karstadt”). If I refer to the company Karstadt or a different branch, I will note it specifically). I started seeing these flyers a lot around the neighbourhood but did not really pay attention to them – after all, I never went shopping in Karstadt and felt that traditional department stores were not keeping up with the times. Why would I care if the department store was closed down? Nevertheless, about a year later, in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, I took part as an artist in an international residency called “Two Roots” with the subtopic “What have we lost to find”, and I came to think about Karstadt again. Due to the pandemic restrictions, I looked for a local project and took part in the activist-led tour of the Karstadt building, organized by Initiative Hermannplatz. After meeting with the activists, I knew this topic had much more to offer – than I had (naively) anticipated. By closing down the department store, not only shopping in the department store but whole ways of living and co-existing would be affected.



The activists have emphasized the danger of serious gentrification in the whole neighborhood. Gentrification is a process that can take various forms. In general, it can be described as a displacement of former residents of a (usually) city area, that experiences an influx of middle-class or wealthy people who renovate businesses and housing, leading to raised property values. For the artist and queer archivist Sara Schulman (2012), gentrification represents a homogenization process. In her book “Gentrification of Mind”, she argues that this urban phenomenon represents “the removal of communities of diverse classes, ethnicities, races, sexualities, languages, and points of view from the central neighbourhoods of cities, and their replacement by more homogenized groups (Schulman, 2012, 14). Schulman notes that while it is commonly believed that gentrification is caused by artists and new residents moving in, the capital investments following far outweigh the effect of the influx of artists and other residents who might not be able to afford to live in other neighbourhoods and enjoy living in a multi-cultural environment.

The rapidly gentrifying area around Hermannplatz is no exception, as multinational real estate powers are trying to focus on this square as a site of their new investment. The brand Karstadt, one of the most important department store franchises in Germany, was bought by an international, Austria-based real estate investor, the SIGNA Group, in 2013. There have been numerous controversies surrounding the acquisition of the Karstadt chain by SIGNA, as well as the SIGNA Group’s overall management of the Karstadt franchise. The SIGNA Group is owned by the billionaire Rene Benko who has strong political connections and who was found guilty of bribery in 2013. Benko’s properties have been subject to many formal investigations (Jones, 2022). The more than one hundred Karstadt department stores are located in central city locations in major German, Austrian and North Italian cities. It has been alleged by media and activists that Signa Group has been deliberately trying to make the department stores go insolvent so that the buildings can “make room” for more luxurious businesses that would attract different clientele and change the outline of the cities.

After finding out more information about the Karstadt case, I started to work on a short documentary film about the values of the architecture surrounding this department store under the working title “Anatolian Village”, as well as a site-specific photo project <sup>1</sup>. However, I felt that approaching the Karstadt through the lenses of the

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<sup>1</sup> Anatolian village is a pejorative term used to refer to Hermannplatz on social media

human-only perspective became unsatisfactory when later that year I began my Master in Gender Studies. I witnessed how my own perspective changed from an anthropocentric perspective to encompass more material and multispecies forms of oppression. I decided to build on my art project with an Master thesis, grounded in more-than-human feminist theories.

Building on ecofeminist theory, I am strongly inspired by the work of Donna Haraway, and queer ecology. Materialist strands of feminism such as ecofeminism have questioned the emphasis on the social constructs in feminist theory and have argued in favour of more materialistic approaches in devising feminist arguments. Since the late 1990s, there has been vocal criticism of the anthropocentric approach to urban studies. The danger of serious displacement is acute not only for the inhabitants of Kreuzberg and Neukölln but also for different ways of living and cohabitation on an affective and broader material level. It influences the building materials, plants, city architecture and other human and non-human entities that will be further discussed in the thesis.

Since 2020, I have followed the ongoing public debate and local activism to stop the Karstadt renovation project on Hermannplatz as well as the closing of other Karstadt branches. The political circumstances surrounding the reconstruction of the Karstadt at Hermannplatz have been chaotic and ever-changing and the subject of frequent newspaper articles. In February 2023, a significant part of the Karstadt chain filed for insolvency and decided to close down more than half of its buildings, excluding the Karstadt at Hermannplatz. The owner of the property has now announced the start of the reconstruction for the beginning of 2024. At the time of writing, it is known that the café at the 4<sup>th</sup> floor, as well as the food department, will close down by the end of 2023.

With this work, I seek to provide a nuanced overview of more-than-human displacement within a European metropole. I consider the Karstadt controversy as an ideal stepping point to engage in an analysis of the gentrification scandal. My thesis is an ethnographic case study that explores looming displacement, gentrification as well as belonging within Karstadt and Hermannplatz. The main question that guides my analysis is: How is more-than-human cohabitation in a European metropole affected by gentrification, and how does it affect the transformation of city? I ask: How we can tell stories of gentrification from a more-than-human perspective? Furthermore, I am interested in the way in which nature-culture discourses inform urban planning. Exploring the agency of materials such as cement, I draw a multi-faceted case study of Karstadt at Hermannplatz from 2020 to 2023.

During my research I met the coffee-drinking community of retired women at the Karstadt café on the fourth floor, who are negatively influenced by the displacement process. Empirically, I have conducted short and semi-structured interviews with Karstadt customers and employees, as well as people working and shopping at the fruit and vegetable marketplace at Hermannplatz, or just simply passing by in this area, and engaged with historical publications about Karstadt. For my study, by focusing on the retired women at café Karstadt, I choose to engage with a story that is not actively heard.

I organize the thesis in the following way.

Chapter 1 presents ecofeminist, queer ecology as well as new materialist feminist theories that are at the core of the thesis. Further it documents relevant examples of research in critical urban geography. My study aims to consider gentrification and with it inevitably connected displacement in a broader nature-culture perspective and add to the emerging scholarship of more-than-human gentrification studies.

Chapter 2 presents the research design, including the sample, methods and epistemological underpinnings of more-than-human ethnography, including my own positionality.

Chapter 3 focuses on the analysis of the human aspects of gentrification. I analyze affective values of architecture, greenwashing and intersectional examples of displacements.

Chapter 4 focuses on the more-than-human aspects of gentrification and displacement, the agency of cement, food, waste, dirt, plants and infrastructures.

I conclude the findings of my research in the final conclusion.

## CHAPTER 1

### LITERATURE REVIEW: MORE-THAN-HUMAN NATURE-CULTURES/ BELONGING, DISPLACEMENT AND AGENCY

#### **1.1. Introduction**

In this chapter I will lay out the theoretical foundations that have contributed to questioning the nature-culture divide and the conceptual framework relevant to my thesis. This includes contextualizing my research within feminist theory and the emerging field of environmental humanities. The areas of environmental humanities (such as animal studies and more-than-human geography) deal with the entanglements of humans and non-humans and question the formation of boundaries between species. Current theories in environmental humanities draw upon various strands of feminist theory, such as feminist science studies, ecofeminism, new materialism and post-humanism, feminist ethics, and critical urban geography.

I will start with a historical excursion to ecofeminism as well as discuss newer eco-feminist adjacent strands such as queer ecology and new materialism. In the second part, I will discuss gentrification from the feminist and more-than-human perspectives. In the third part, after a brief introduction to the argument of the nature-culture divide, I will propose several concepts from feminist affect and embodiment theories that will guide the subsequent analysis. Finally, this theoretical chapter will be rounded by an introduction to concepts from theoretical strands of other disciplines that further inform my analysis.

#### **1.2. Ecofeminism - questioning the nature-culture divide**

Ecofeminism<sup>2</sup> is a strand of feminist theory and practice that has addressed a pervasive nature-culture divisions since the late 1970s. Ecology has been a topic of long-standing interest in feminism. According to Greta Gaard (1993), ecofeminism, as a theory, developed from the feminist activist movements, such as women's health

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<sup>2</sup> The first usage of the word ecofeminism is considered to come from the French philosopher Françoise D'Eaubonne in 1974 (Lorentzen & Eaton, 2002), also part of a radical lesbian and gay movement. According to Bryson (2016), other ecofeminism writers including Susan Griffin (*Woman and Nature*, 1984), Annette Collard (*Rape of the Wild*, 1988) and Caldecott and Leland ([eds], *Reclaim the Earth*, 1983), Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land* (1984); Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (1989). These works have been pivotal in ecofeminism as they have compared the subjugation of women to subjugation of humankind and nature.

movements, anti-nuclear movements, and lesbian separatist movements. Feminist activism in the late 1970s and early 1980s were catalyzed by various political-environmental changes. These activists addressed a variety of issues in the second half of 20<sup>th</sup> century such as degradation at the time (DDT, acid rain), energy production, famine, environmental degradation, pollution, deforestation, destruction of soil through monocultures and fertilizers, and nuclear energy. Examples include the 1986 Chernobyl Nuclear accident in Ukraine or the Chipko movement for tree protection in India. The first ecofeminist authors and activists aimed to question the division of these problems as either natural or cultural. When analyzing these societal and environmental problems, it became evident that the “cultural” such as capitalism, colonialism and sexism cannot be disentangled from the “natural”, such as the destruction of the soil, pollution and deforestation.

Lois Ann Lorentzen & Heather Eaton (2002) summarized the historical reasoning of ecofeminism as three interrelated propositions. Firstly, the effects of environmental destruction are gendered. The gendered, racialized and classed effects of ecological devastation have been widely documented and remain – as most issues raised by the first ecofeminists – ongoing (Lezama, 2022, Alexis-Martin, 2015). Secondly, many societies reproduce strong symbolic links between motherhood/womanhood and nature. Thirdly, for the reasons above, women are more suitable to create ecologically-aware ways of living and caring for Earth (Lorentzen & Eaton, 2002, 2).

The first generation of ecofeminists chose to embrace the cultural associations between “woman” and “nature” in order to forge explicitly environmentalist positions. The link between the oppression of women and conceptualizing nature as “the Other” has been particularly researched by ecofeminist theorists. With respect to the role of the dualities in Western thinking, Stacy Alaimo (2016) reminds us that these dualities work intersectionally in establishing “the Other” in a broader sense. Ecofeminists claimed that the Western dualistic system links women to nature and constructs them as vulnerable as well as dangerous. Ecofeminist literary (Estés, 1992) and theology feminist scholars (Daly, 1978) have documented historical links about dualisms such as mind/body, culture/nature, heaven/Earth, cultured / primitive, human/animal which have helped to justify gendered and other forms of oppression. The third – and later the most heavily contested - historical argument by the first generation of ecofeminists assumed women have the capacity to save the planet. This has been especially strongly argued in activist happenings such as the forest-conservation Chipko movement, where

internationally broadcasted images of women protecting trees not only helped the environment but also upheld the female position within Indian society.

Since the 1990s, ecofeminism has been slowly expanding (see Gaard, 1993, Sandilands, 2002). Some of the core ecofeminist arguments have been contested and the first generation of ecofeminist thought has been accused of being essentialist and reductive. The aforementioned third argument about women's primal capacity for saving the planet has been the most criticized. Contemporary ecofeminists have pointed out that the understanding of certain ecological values as feminine does not rid women of the responsibility for past and present ecological disasters. Stacy Alaimo (2016) and Rosi Braidotti (2016) built upon the arguments of Val Plumwood (1993), who refused to see the essentialist idea of the "good woman", who is destined to save the planet. Plumwood states that it is inaccurate to say that women in industrialized societies do not contribute to ecological disasters as many of them engage in everyday consumerist lifestyles, cruelty towards animals, and support wars and ecological exploitations. Moreover, many contemporary ecofeminists rejected the earlier-stated conservative-sounding connotations between womanhood and Earth, such as endowing the planet with endearing maternal metaphors such as Mother Earth.

Scholars such as Catriona Sandilands (2010) explored ways of fusing queer theory, feminism and ecology in order to modify our understanding of the many existing nature-culture concepts, and refined ecofeminist arguments with the help of queer and trans-ecological theories. Queerness in ecology surpasses further concepts of sexuality and gender, yet also provides thought-provoking insights into human and non-human gender and sexualities conception. Queer theorists rarely consider non-human species through binary gender perspectives, which leads to enhancing our understanding of also human gender and sexual identities (see Hayward, 2008, Ah-King & Hayward, 2013). In doing so, queer ecologists provide an alternative paradigm to the binary and limited modes of thought that Western philosophy offers, and further challenge the nature-culture divide. Similar to ecofeminism, the ecology concepts which come from queer ecologies are beyond the binary of human and nature, and the "cultured" conceptions of nature, deconstructing the dualistic notions of "human" and "natural". The connection between activism and theory is equally prevalent for queer ecologists.

Queer and trans ecologies attune to the harm caused by heterosexist worldviews that have further contributed to natural exploitation. According to queer ecology, original ecofeminist ideas often conform to a hetero-cis-sexist understanding of the

world and reaffirm the traditional gender role division. Queer ecology scholars aim to contest the conservative trends in mainstream ecology and in earlier ecofeminism, that often called for the return to heteropatriarchal family structures and connected this attempt to restoring the health of the planet. It is important to note that there have been lesbian and (in today's understanding) queer ecofeminists, such as the artist and activist Annie Sprinkle (2021). In addition, the 1970s lesbian separatist communities were influenced by or actively claimed eco-feminist positions (Sandilands, 2002).

The contest of the anthropocentric nature-culture divide has offered a crucial analysis of the connections between colonialism, patriarchy, capitalism and environmental exploitations. As Judith Butler (2004) reminds us, there is an overlapping genealogy between feminist, trans and queer theories as they all found conceptual and political grounding in feminism. The biggest contribution of ecofeminist theory is the framing of ecological issues as feminist and the rejection of the nature-culture divide.

### **1.3. From nature and culture to material agency**

As Stacy Alaimo (2016) observes, a lot of feminists stayed away from engagement with the natural sciences, as they reject the essentialist conception of womanhood, seen as rooted in biology. Alaimo (2016) calls it the “flight from nature” (Alaimo, 2016, 463). In Alaimo's understanding, this hesitation stems from the long-standing (social)scientific tradition of making racist and sexist arguments based on claimed biological differences between men and women, as well as between other identity categories such as race or ethnicity. Besides ecofeminism, a growing number of feminist science scholars trained in philosophy, biology, and physics have embraced natural sciences since the 1980s. These scholars use the knowledge not only to confront the racist, sexist and colonialist presumptions often explained by biology, but also to problematize the general division between the “natural” and the “cultural”. As Alaimo concludes, humans cannot be excluded from nature.

The very notion of nature as something distinct from culture and human activity has become unthinkable in the twenty-first century, as climate change, mass extinction, genetic engineering, and pollution can no longer be ignored. While

there are plenty of lively creatures, beings, and interactions, there is no such thing as a separate domain of nature in the Anthropocene (2016, 533).<sup>3</sup>

Building upon the ecofeminist critique of binary oppositions, Donna Haraway (2003) proposes her influential concept of “naturecultures”. Rather than a fixed definition, naturecultures presents a new worldview, in which the imaginary boundaries between the “cultivated” culture and “pure” nature are effaced and new ways of navigating the shared space between species are explored and established<sup>4</sup>. With this concept, Haraway acknowledges that nature and culture have both been biophysically and socially formed and are inseparable from each other. Haraway notes that “conceiving of ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ as either polar opposites or universal categories is foolish” (Haraway, 2003, 8). In ecofeminist tradition, she proposes to think of “nature” and “culture” as a connection.

In addition to nature and culture, Haraway has not forgotten to ask questions about technological advancements. Her response to the “technology expansion” (1985) burgeoning in the 1980s is her influential figure of a cyborg, followed by later work on companion species, that have co-evolved with humans in naturecultures. Haraway’s “companion species” refer to a range of human and non-human relationships. For Haraway, these species bridge gaps in between various categories. In her work such as “Companion Species Manifesto” (2003) or “When Species Meet” (2008), she presents the formation of distinct species, such as mice and dogs. Haraway (2008) has repeatedly claimed that we have never been human, to underline humanness as an interspecies relationship and the human dependence on others.<sup>5</sup> With this provocative statement,

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<sup>3</sup> Anthropocene is an influential but contested term for the current geological epoch closely connected to the development of capitalism. Alaimo describes it in the way that “human activities have altered the planet to such an extent that these changes register on a vast geological time scale. The Anthropocene began around 1800, when the steam engine was adopted and fossil fuels began to be used extensively” (Alaimo, 2016, 531). Critical responses to the term Anthropocene include recontextualization of the epoch as Chthulucene, Plantationocene (Haraway, 2015). These concepts stress the importance of colonialism in the formation of the current geological epoch.

<sup>4</sup> In a similar vein, the philosopher Brian Massumi (2002) presents the “natureculture continuum”. According to Karen Barad (2020), natures and cultures cannot be addressed unidirectionally or separately, and we cannot ‘treat either nature or culture as a determining factor or holding one or the other as fixed and self-evident’ (Barad 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Anna Tsing suggests that “human nature is an interspecies relationship.” (Tsing 2008 in Kirksey, 2010, 551)



Haraway hints at the species that live within and around the human species - the microorganisms, including bacteria, fungi, archaea and viruses living on the human body, that to a great degree outnumber the amount of human cells. When she writes about her dog, who she considers as a companion, she refers to “dog writing as a feminist writing or vice-versa” (Haraway, 2008, 7). This reference acknowledges the co-dependence between humans and non-humans, and attempts to center these relationships as an important field in contemporary feminism.

In the tradition of naturecultures and other anti-binary arguments, new strands of feminist theory were introduced in the late 1990s, such as new materialism and post-humanism. According to Marta E. Giménez (2018), materialist strands of feminism tie gender and other inequalities to the material conditions of capitalism in which the social concepts are created (Giménez, 2018). Unlike historical materialism, new materialism focuses not only on the material discourse, but rather on how “matter comes to matter” (Bennet, 2010) in the embodied experience of the socially classified subjects and the socio-material conditions of living (Giménez, 2018). One of the main objectives of the new materialist philosophy is to decentre human relations but foreground matter as agential. According to Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (2010), “foregrounding material factors and reconfiguring our very understanding of matter are prerequisites for any plausible account of coexistence and its conditions in the twenty-first century” (Coole & Frost, 2). This “mattering” (Bennet, 2010) refers to the active agency and influence of non-human entities. It highlights the ways in which material objects, forces, or processes shape and affect social, political, and ecological dynamics. As Rebecca Coleman (2019) reminds us, ‘the emancipation of matter is a feminist project’ (Braidotti in Coleman, 2). Emancipation of matter from cultural conceptions and moving away from human exceptionalism means understanding matter in the broadest sense as an active agent in the creation of the world. The argumentation has sometimes been called “the material turn” in feminism. The understanding of matter as agential will be crucial for my analytical chapters.

#### **1.4. Environmental gentrification**

My thesis looks at gentrification through the feminist, more-than-human lens. Critical feminist geography and urban studies developed in the late 1970s during the

second wave of feminism, when feminist scholars<sup>6</sup> began to examine women's limited access to (public) spaces (see Gil, 1989, Fenster, 2005). Partially as a response to other leftist and radical critical geographers, and as a development of feminist epistemologies such as standpoint theory, they challenged the neutrality of urban studies as a discipline and investigate gendered aspects of the relationships within public spaces. In her pivotal study of the trajectories of fear, Gill Valentine(1989) stresses the important role effect plays in negotiating belonging within urban space. The effects such as fear mediate how certain groups feel comfortable and entitled to use space.

In her work "The Right to the Gendered City: Different Formations of Belonging in Everyday Life" (2006), Fenster offers a critique and revision of Lefebvre's concept of the right to the city. Lefebvre's right to the city encompasses two key elements: the right to utilize the city for everyday activities and the right to participate in decision-making processes concerning the urban space (Fenster, 2006, 291). Fenster highlights that Lefebvre's concept inadequately acknowledges the power dynamics inherent in the right to the city, consequently influencing how various demographic groups can engage and derive enjoyment from urban environments in specific contexts (Fenster, 2006, 219). Equally important for Fenster is the right to belong. The concept of belonging creates the possibility of using urban space in everyday life. The right to use and belong thus appears to be universal, but from the point of view of lived experience, it is not. Certain groups are excluded from these rights in different situations.

As mentioned in my introduction, gentrification is an important phenomenon in urban studies. Feminist scholarship has considered not only the gendered effect of gentrification. Beatrice Mount's (2020) study proposes an intersectional perspective: her case study of Washington DC's revitalization of black neighbourhoods traces a clear connection between the negative displacement effects on long-term residents as well as the racial transformation of the city, when more affluent, white residents move in. Mount pleads for studying gentrification in consideration of the racial and class historical development within the studied area.

Gentrifying real estate firms equate whiteness to safety, and thereby equate whiteness to marketability and benefit. The process of surveillance,

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<sup>6</sup> Feminist geography develops closely in a dialogue with other disciplines: for example, queer geography questions the division of spaces based on sexuality and spatial inclusion of non-heterosexual people (Oswin, 2008).

monitoring, and over-policing of the resident communities of color ultimately secures the development firms' desired whiteness. Upper class, white landowners and developers benefit from this micro-regulation and criminalization, buying up properties at discounted rates to remodel, resell, and market to young, white gentrifiers (Mount, 2020, 9).

Mount's study shows that, while geographical patterns of displacement depend upon the social and economic contexts of the time period in which they occur, capitalism relies on uneven development. Her study concludes the need for queer feminist city planning as well as the importance of grassroots anti-gentrification activism. Contemporary urban studies feminist scholars (Puar in Oswin, 2008) note the importance of an intersectional approach when examining the interconnectedness of race, queerness and sexuality and post-colonial theory within spatial relations.

Feminist scholars from multiple disciplines took a multispecies approach to urban landscapes and produced a growing literature on multi-species/transspecies urban theory from different angles, often following a particular human-non-human relationship (Hubbard & Brooks, 2022, Gandy, 2019, Holmberg, 2015, McKnight&Wolch&Emel, 1998, van Dooren & Rose, 2014). In recent years, ecologically-informed understandings of gentrification have been a frequent subject of research. In my analysis, I focus specifically on these aspects of gentrification such as eco-gentrification, where certain areas are made greener and more "ecological", in order to attract more solvent residents and businesses. In the study about gentrification in a seaside town in Kent, England, Andrew Brooks and Phil Hubbard (2021), examine the link between the increased popularity of oysters and the influx of wealthy inhabitants to the town. The authors take a nuanced position when they regard oysters' agency in the process of gentrification, as well as the vulnerability of the local oyster. They note the increased fragility of the sea ecosystem due to artificial oyster breeding. The simultaneously painful and beneficial effects of gentrification are experienced by local inhabitants and animals alike. As the authors note, some species adapt and flourish despite the fact that touristic investment in beach areas is prioritized over the biosphere. They conclude that oysters, as well as other non-human agents, such as pebbles on the beach, provide the "infrastructure of gentrification". The presence of animals attracts tourism and a foodie culture fueled by oyster cultivation and consumption. In the seaside town, the oysters are not only consumed as food but the dead shells create beach

decoration. Oysters become a signifier of a class transformation of the area as well as a commodity and an active agent of change. The authors regard oysters as:

A visceral object whose affective qualities create hierarchies of taste and distaste through processes of desire and disgust; it is a marker of class change that positions the 'local' within wider circuits of consumption; and, finally, it is a laboring body that reconstitutes the coastal ecosystem on which aquaculture depends (Brooks&Hubbard, 31, 2022)

As Brooks and Hubbard note, these particular non-human-human relationships lead to the re-evaluation of the non-human agents.

Another interesting study on more-than-human gentrification comes from Colin Jerolmack (2013)'s *Global Pigeon*. He uncovers the connections between gentrification and the decline or change of lifestyle for urban pigeons and their breeders in New York City. Pigeon fanciers and their pigeons in Brooklyn increasingly needed to leave their rooftop breeding stations, so that other, more solvent inhabitants could move in (Jerolmack, 98). As the new inhabitants did not share the former tenants' passion for bird breeding, the space for pigeons in the city diminished. Both studies note the importance of class as a category when examining human-animal relations and the historical shifts in the popularity of certain animals. The pigeon fanciers are older, usually the inhabitants living there for generations, often having inherited pigeon-fancying from their community, and are being replaced as the apartments are renovated and repurposed for business as well as luxury lofts.

The contemporary decade has brought attention to investment methods such as greenwashing, that cause eco-gentrification, which seems particularly relevant to the gentrification case at Hermannplatz. Eco-gentrification means an ecologically-framed development where certain areas are made greener and more "ecological", in order to attract more solvent residents and businesses. As Lena Ali (2020) argues, sustainable urban development has a significant effect on the housing market and its desired effect for higher-income residents (Ali et al, 2020, 2). In the study about green gentrification in Leipzig, a mid-size East-German city, Ali could trace a specific movement in the area where a new park was built: Residents living close to the park now belong to social milieus such as the "urban young professionals" or environmentally conscious "middle-

class professionals” who value and demand a good quality of life and can afford rising property prices and rents (Ali, 2020,17).

While there have been many studies about gentrification, the concept of displacement gets significantly less attention despite its centrality to the process of gentrification. According to Elliott-Cooper, Hubbard, and Lees (2020), gentrification-induced displacement is characterized as a form of un-homing, distinct yet interconnected with other forms of involuntary mobility. It entails a violent disruption that forcibly uproots individuals from their communities and disrupts their sense of belonging. Displacement disproportionately affects marginalized working-class groups, women, ethnic minority communities, and individuals with complex needs, thus emphasizing the inherent socio-spatial injustice embedded in the process. Rather than accepting displacement as an inevitable consequence, it is crucial to recognize and prioritize the "right to stay put" (Elliott-Cooper et al, 2020) as a fundamental aspect of any vision for the right to the city, even though defining what constitutes a homed community can be challenging. Instead, it is essential to collect data that accurately capture the lived experiences of urban displacement from the perspective of lower-income groups. This approach unveils the violent processes of un-homing that profoundly impact some of the most vulnerable populations.

I am interested in looking into larger political and (post)colonial, racial and material connections. Exploring materials such as cement enhances my attempt to provide a multi-faceted case study of Karstadt at Hermannplatz between 2020 and 2023. Thom van Dooren and Deborah Bird Rose (2012) have offered the model of “storied-place”, as a way of “responding” or understanding urban species' conviviality. Thom van Dooren (2012) refers to a process of mutual appreciation, paying attention to the ongoing loss of diversity and extinction of species in the mutually cohabited world. By focusing on the experience and movement of animals and other non-humans in the city, the storied place brings an enhanced understanding of interspecies diversity and entanglement of multiple stories. In doing so, nonhuman species are increasingly being regarded by anthropologists as proper members of society, rather than being disconnected from it. Borrowing from the definition of the philosopher Edward Casey, places are formed between bodies and the terrains they inhabit (2). The storied-places become storied by means of overlapping different narratives: the overlapping does not just layer new stories over, but the stories are dynamically emerging. They define story

as a narrative created from subsequential and meaningful events. The crucial question becomes: who has the active voice and what stories come to matter?

By focusing on the flying foxes groups and a penguin colony in Sydney, van Dooren and Rose speculate how these animals navigate their way in the air (flying foxes) and water (penguins) and how the cities and their inhabitants look from their radically-different perspective that is differently grounded than the human one. By reshaping our focus, the storied-places offer ways for more involved more-than-human conviviality. For my research, I choose to engage with stories that are not actively heard, and attempt to accept non-humans as narrative subjects.

Matthew Gandy (2019) is interested in the liminal spaces in the development of urban natures such as wastelands and their subsequent “renaturalization”. This can lead to the reappearance of rare species such as the fly *pocota personata* in an inner London cemetery garden, in an “urban island” within a gentrifying London, a site of development pressures. The fly is on an extinction list throughout Europe, and its reappearance is traced to the decaying woods of former graves. Gandy notes the emphasis on “re-wilding” in an urban context (leaving sites in their decaying form, such as leaving trees to rot) provokes the re-emerging of the rare species. Gandy documents the growing tensions around the nature protection service and land-use possibilities fueled by the developers’ interest, decentralized city power as well as the need for protection of urban diversity and sustainable city planning. He discusses the pressures erupting in 2013 when a plan to construct a luxury six-storey “mixed use” development house adjacent to the park was announced, greenlighted under dubious ecological permission, claiming that it did not present any danger to the park protection. The connection to displacement became apparent in this case. Grassroots activism and nature enthusiasm around the protection of the species provokes attention, but only with a worrying degree of results. Gandy remarks that the obvious specism is the reason why these flies are not considered worthy of saving. As Gandy suggests, an “enlightened utilitarian framework based on the ecological need for decay, replacement, and the recycling of matter clearly forms an integral element in the well-being of nature and biodiversity” (Gandy, 399, 2019). In his study, Gandy highlights the entanglement of environmental concerns, capitalistic interests and city architecture, that I also analyze within my study.

As the focus on studying non-human animals as agents of gentrification grows, the effect of material remains understudied. An example of the study of the “material

turn” is Siddhart Menon’s (2023) analysis of the gendered effect as well as capitalist intervention in his study that documents the change from mudhouses to cement in the contemporary Himachal Pradesh region in India. For some women, building a cement house is a class step-up, in other cases, it means more cleaning for women. He also uncovers heavy investments by international companies, that have pushed for cement use, while presenting it as progress, an intrinsic value.

### **1.5. More-than-human agency**

To guide my analysis, I draw from new materialist feminist theories of embodiment and affect. Feminist philosophy and ethics of care have long argued that bodies do not exist outside politics and culture. The new materialist trends in feminism have been embracing a shift in focus, from individualized beings to the shared, more complex relationships of belonging. These belongings conceived through the ecofeminist lens are multiple, intersecting and trans-species. In focusing on the shared experience of belonging, feminist scholars have widely studied the importance of shared vulnerability and responsibility. The idea that individuals are inherently relational and interdependent also generates a distinctive perspective on (more-than-) human rights. Nira Yuval-Davis (2006) defines belonging as an “emotional attachment, about feeling ‘at home’” (Yuval-Davis, 2006, 1) and the feelings of safety. As Yuval-Davis notes, “The politics of belonging comprises specific political projects aimed at constructing belonging in particular ways to particular collectivities that are, at the same time, themselves being constructed by these projects in very particular ways” (Yuval-Davis, 2006, 1). Yuval-Davis emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between these two categories for a critical political analysis of racism and nationalism. Even though Yuval-Davis’ theories are anthropocentric, they can be retooled for a more-than-human perspective.<sup>7</sup>

According to Haraway, we “bear responsibility for an ongoing care, in a thick and consequential present” (Haraway, 2011, 100). Analyzing her previously mentioned relationship with her own dog, Haraway (2008) views the interspecies encounters as asymmetrical, as humans hold power over the other species. These relationships bear ethical implications and a heightened need for responsibility, or rather “response-ability

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<sup>7</sup> In a similar vein, Jennifer Wolch (1998) proposes the model of transspecies urban theory, where human and non-human agents actively shape life in the city. Wolch demands that humanimal relationships in the city have to be taken seriously and cities can no longer be regarded as only inhabited by humans, but as a shared space in an intricate system of dependencies and oppression.

– the ability to cultivate response,<sup>8</sup> greater awareness of the non-human and the ability to exist mindfully in these multifaceted relationships. For Haraway, this is not limited to animals, yet it encompasses “the human and non-human, the organic and technological, carbon and silicon, freedom and structure, history and myth, the rich and the poor, the state and the subject, diversity and depletion, modernity and postmodernity, and nature and culture in unexpected ways” (Haraway, 2008, 4).

Theories of agency have been particularly important within feminist theory. One of the famous concepts comes from Judith Butler (1990/2006), who stresses the ever-present agency of subjects for resistance against hegemonic power. Even though Butler’s concepts remain quite anthropocentric, they can be adjusted for further definitions. In the emerging field of new materialism, Jane Bennett (2010) pleads for recognition of the active participation of non-human actants in political events. With “vibrant matter” Bennett refers to the agential potency of nonhuman inorganic matter that offers vast potential for resistance and material agency. She offers her theory of “vital materialism” to name an active force that runs through human and non-human bodies. By reconceptualizing political processes and events as partially random configurations of human and non-human actants, their understanding becomes fuller and multi-sited.

I understand ecology as a complex political relationship between multispecies subjects that are co-constituted within the nature-cultures that they shape, inhabit and transform. In new materialist understanding, these non-human actants co-constitute political agency. Bennett’s (2010) concept of political ecology refers to the common vitality of matter, that decentralizes humans. Bennett’s project is to erase the boundaries of agency not only between human and non-human species but also between the living and non-living actants. For Bennett, this vibrant materiality is at the core of political events: “My aspiration is to articulate a vibrant materiality that runs alongside and inside humans to see how analyses of political events might change if we gave the force of things more due” (Bennett, 2010, 8). She defines the “thing-power” as crucial as human power. Her arguments are both post-humanist as well as humanist which, by understanding the non-human actants and expanding the definition of the living, contribute to a fuller understanding of human perspective. A similar definition comes from Latour’s (2004) political ecology: in the vein of Haraway’s (2003) naturecultures,

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<sup>8</sup> The adjacent notion of response-ability is developed by new-materialist theorists such as Karen Barad (2007) - “differential responsiveness”



he views ecology as a common world (in the sense of the Greek cosmos) of more-than-human entanglements. He defines political ecology as human-nature assemblages, and as “matters of concern”. These matters of concern are human-non-human composites, such as embryos and prisons. These composites resonate with Haraway’s figure of a cyborg. Bennett (2010) goes further and abolishes boundaries between human and non-human agency altogether as she tries to erase boundaries between waste and humans. I see it as an ontological difference – between Latour and Haraway the emphasis is on the entanglements, with Bennett on the matter itself.

Nancy Tuana in her essay “Viscous porosity: Witnessing Katrina” (2008) proposes “viscous porosity” as the experience of permeability between the human and non-human bodies. For Tuana, viscosity offers a resistance within porous boundaries. While analyzing the aftermath of hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, Nancy Tuana calls for an ontology that “rematerializes the social and takes seriously the agency of the naturalcultural” (Tuana, 2008, 197). This interactionist ontology offers attention to processes, that are complex and dynamic and always in relation to each other. Tuana considers the division between the biological and the social as “permeable and shifting, while at the same time deeply entrenched in bodies and practices” (Tuana 2008, 196). In doing so, Tuana also moves within the naturecultures and offers the term “viscous porosity” to specify the construction of boundaries between nature and culture. These categories can be both useful in certain moments, but ultimately, they create hierarchies that lead to sexist and racist consequences.

Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, in her influential work "The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins" (2015), examines the effects of “capitalist ruins” on both human and non-human actors. Tsing explores how the processes of capitalism disrupt and transform landscapes, economies, and social structures, leading to the emergence of unexpected and precarious forms of life. By focusing on the particular case of the global matsutake mushroom trade, Tsing highlights the ways in which capitalist ruins create opportunities for diverse collaborations and new forms of survival amidst the ruins of capitalism. Through her analysis, Tsing challenges dominant narratives of progress and growth and invites us to reconsider our relationship with capitalist ruins and the potential for life to persist and thrive in these precarious conditions.

In the new materialist understanding of non-human agents as actors, non-human actants bear political agency. José Muñoz’s (2020) proposition of “brown commons” is

a concept in the perception of more-than-human resistance that treats human and non-human actors on a non-hierarchical level. This wide-ranging term encompasses brown people, places, feelings, sounds, animals, minerals, flora, and other objects. Muñoz adds that:

Feelings, sounds, buildings, neighbourhoods, environments, and the nonhuman organic life that might circulate in such an environment alongside humans, the inorganic presences that life is so often attached to. Nonhuman brownness is only partially knowable to us through the screen of human perception. But then *everything* I am describing as being brownness is only partially knowable. Affect, as I am employing it in this project, is meant to address a sense of being-in-common (Muñoz, 2020, 396)

For Muñoz's, the brownness refers to a certain non-knowability, liminality. He focuses on the shared experience of marginalization. As Muñoz proposes, the brownness is connected to their devaluation outside their commons as there are global and local forces in places that are constantly working on devaluing this value. However, their power lies in their potential for resistance and persistence, in which their perceived invisibility becomes their biggest strength. The common refers to their mutual connections, the in-common values. The brownness in Muñoz's theory is not only racial theory but it is an affect, onto-epistemological concept. People are brown by their accent, race and migration status. Brownness is always connected to a precarious spatiality, such as a challenged migrant status. The shared brownness commons presents the power of resistance, as well as their potential for harm.

Materiality becomes significant in infrastructural labour. Infrastructural labour refers to the various activities, both manual and intellectual, involved in the planning, construction, operation, and maintenance of infrastructure systems, which are vital for Karstadt. According to Menon (2023), infrastructural labour points towards the significant role played by materials in generating social hierarchies as well as power dynamics and resource accessibility. By focusing on materiality, the larger political and economic mechanisms responsible for uneven infrastructural advancements can be uncovered, while also considering the localized, individual-level ways in which the physical aspects of infrastructure affect the daily use of these structures.

Another theoretical as well as methodological inspiration for this work has been Annemarie Mol's "Eating in Theory" (2021). Mol's autoethnographic work is interspersed with a valuable naturecultural excursion into the philosophy of eating. She examines the anthropocentric complexities of human superiority and the dependence on food as well as the intricacies of global food chains. Food itself, as Mol proposes, has a viscous porous quality. As Mol suggests, eating is the bodily activity that trespasses the boundaries between bodies and enables the mobility of matter within and outside the bodies. She considers the act of eating to be a "multi-sited, dispersed" act that is "externally entangled, internally differentiated" (Mol, 2021, 49). "My bodily senses allow me, an integrated subject, to perceive phenomena in the outside world in an integrated manner" (Mol, 2021, 50). The bodily organs accept and transform these different matters, creating dynamic semipermeable boundaries.

### **1.6. Conclusion**

This chapter has laid out some of the foundational feminist theories that inform my research. I have aimed to demonstrate that materialist strands of feminism take a broader understanding of power relations, that moves away from a human-only perspective. The new materialist approach builds on the nature-culture continuum from ecofeminism, and further decentralized the human and provides a more entangled ontology worldview. The challenge of the duality between humans and nature, nature and culture, remains a central argument. These feminist researchers included the power relationships between human and non-human agents and reconceptualized "matter" as agential and literate, and with this, brought the materiality of the matter into the broader political-ecological perspective.

Within this framework, the new materialist tradition presented a co-constitutive take on humans and its environment, the Anthropocene and technology. To achieve these goals, materialist feminists borrow and transform theory and methods from other disciplines such as natural sciences, feminist science studies or arts. My study aims to contribute to considering gentrification, and with it inevitable displacement, in a broader natureculture perspective and add to the emerging scholarship of more-than-human gentrification studies. The literature review has elaborated on the key concepts that inform my study, namely vibrant matter, more-than-human-gentrification, storied places and against the backdrop of the nature-cultures argument

As the posthumanist and new materialists conclude, an interdisciplinary approach in research is crucial to “grasp and examine the unfolding complexity of ongoing ecological, socio-cultural and politico-economic changes” (Braidotti & Åsberg 2018, 3). These scholars have been invested in using existing as well as repurposing methods for their research projects. In the subsequent chapter, I zoom into the important epistemological and methodological tools that have informed my approach to the case study.

## CHAPTER 2

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### **2.1. A queer-feminist approach to research**

In this thesis I wish to address more-than-human gentrification and how belonging and displacement are negotiated in an urban space. As a student of Gender Studies I am committed to conducting feminist research. According to Donna Haraway (2003), “feminist inquiry is about understanding how things work, who is in the action, what might be possible, and how worldly actors might somehow be accountable to and love each other less violently” (7). As I have demonstrated in my literary overview, Haraway’s work and other ecofeminist-informed scholarship prove that not all feminist research must deal with aspects of gender or sexuality, gender is only one analytical category<sup>9</sup> used in feminist theory. The presented theoretical background includes an array of feminist approaches in the post-humanist and new-materialist traditions. In asking after the relationship between gentrification and the life of city human and non-human agents, I am interested in exploring the variability of realities and the intricate, ever-shifting nature of material relationships.

Epistemologically, I am guided by Haraway’s concept of situated knowledge (1988). Haraway claims that situatedness is a key factor in embedding knowledge. As Haraway emphasizes, all knowledge is situated. Western scientific and philosophical discourses claim neutrality and impartiality, yet the knowledge is organized in a way that conceals its own partiality and interest (Haraway, 1988, 587). Haraway’s idea of situated knowledge problematizes the dichotomy of division into object and subject. Unlike previous standpoint theories (see Harding, 1986), which attribute epistemological advantages to certain subjects who are oppressed, such as women in a patriarchal society, with situated knowledge, Haraway emphasizes the importance of situational anchoring. The theory of situated knowledge serves as a constant reminder, that any type of knowledge gained during the research cannot be easily applicable to

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<sup>9</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw (Bryson, 2016, 603) argues that feminist research should start from the assumption that identities forged in oppressive relationships do not exist parallel to one another but as intersecting forces. In practice, it is (nearly) impossible to separate gender relations from other power relations within research. Therefore, a contemporary feminist research increasingly implements intersectional approaches. I aim to conduct intersectional research, where different identity categories overlap and their effect cannot be easily extricable.

another context, as it is always tied to the conditions of research and the particular interaction.

I understand my study as a contribution to queer ecology. Queering for me means going against the norm, an active practice and political action encompassing more than sexuality and gender. Queer epistemologies endow new meaning to the pervasive dominance of the heteronormative world. Jerry Thomas (2017) presents models on how to use what he calls the “queer sensibilities” as a research methodology. He demonstrates the use of queer theory in research, for making connections visible and excavating and disrupting different moments. For him, queer sensibilities act as methodology for assessing queer visibility in public space. By applying them for analysis of the absences and accessibility of homoerotic sculptures by the American artist Charles Ray in the (heteronormative) public space, he comes to the conclusion that their lack of visibility is a constitutional problem, as it means that LGBTQI+ rights are not as equally visibly represented in public as their heterosexual counterparts. I’m guided by queer sensibilities not only for the reading of Karstadt as a forcefully heteronormative space, but as well as a disruption principle in the broader sense of a disruption: a political action that destabilizes the status quo in the normative understanding of the world.

## **2.2. Methods: Sensory and affective ethnography**

Methodologically, feminist research overlaps with other types of research in social sciences. To analyze the current case at Karstadt from a more-than-human perspective, I conducted an ethnographic qualitative research. In order to examine the more-than-human entanglements within the Karstadt controversy, I have chosen the method of participant observation (ethnography) as my main research method that I adapted for the study of more-than-human relations. In my adaptation, I am inspired by the methods of multispecies ethnography (Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010 ).<sup>10</sup>

My analysis further draws on historical publications about Karstadt with a focus on the period of 1920s-1940s when Karstadt at Hermannplatz was built; German online newspaper articles (Tagespiegel, Berliner Woche, Berliner Morgenpost, TAZ ) focusing

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<sup>10</sup> As Kirksey and his research team note (Kirksey et al, 2014), ethnographers have been expanding its primary method ethnography to diversify their modes of storytelling and expand the human focus to include multiple species such as animals, plants, microbes and fungi. Based on ecofeminist theory, multispecies ethnography centers on how a multitude of organisms’ livelihoods shape and are shaped by political, economic, and cultural forces (Kirksey, 2014).

on the case between 2020-2023, the social media of SIGNA (Instagram and Facebook account Nicht ohne Euch) and their promotional and informational materials such as brochures and official statements. These sources do not provide the only background information about the department store, its history and plans to rebuild; I also trace different affects and non-material agents.

Tracing and analyzing affects have been crucial for the theories of contemporary queer and feminist scholars such as brown commons by José Muñoz that were discussed in my previous chapter. As I have noted in the example of Gill Valentine's work (1989), affects are important factors in negotiating spatial relationships and (inter)personal attunements of belonging. In this context, "affect" refers to the emotional, embodied, and sensory experiences that arise in relation to the research. According to Sara Ahmed (2017), an affect is "a gut feeling [that] has its own intelligence. You have to get closer to the feeling" (Ahmed 2017, 27). In Ahmed's work, "a 'feminist gut' might indicate that something might be worth investigating and engaging with. By tracing different affects during the interviews as well as historical readings focusing on emotions and feelings such as nostalgia and comfort, the affects offer a different mode of understanding.

Affects can be a methodological guiding principle both in textual and discursive data analysis. In her manuscript "Along the Archival Grain" (2009), the anthropologist and historian Ann Laura Stoler suggests examining affective dimensions within Dutch colonial archives. She pays attention to the emotional resonances, traces, and affects embedded in the archival grain – the textures and patterns in the official "neutral" documents. Affective approaches to ethnography have been conceptualized and applied by contemporary researchers such as trans ethnographies by Cleo Wölfle Hazard (2022) and the multisensory affective ethnography by Lindsay Hamilton and Nik Taylor (2017). In these ethnographies, the focus lies on senses like smell, taste and touch rather than the primacy of language, and the bodily experience and the experience of affect play a pivotal role: "In straight ecology, field experience is rarely allowed to transgress into the conference, and affect is regarded as wrong or queer." (Wölfle Hazard, 89, 2022).

Hamilton and Taylor are concerned with the use of sensory methods as a practical application of new material theory and are particularly poignant when conducting ecofeminist research. They argue that using "sense-less" research prioritizes the duality of mind and body because it emphasizes rationality. The researchers

conclude that, through an active engagement with the not so highly valorized senses: “touch and smell—can often be unpleasant, thus seemingly supporting and justifying their exclusion from research” (Hamilton & Taylor, 2017, 114). As my thesis is presented as traditional academic work, that is presented in a textual form, I have made a point of engaging senses and paying attention to non-verbal communication as an attempt to outweigh the limitations of the textual reproduction of my research experience. Influenced by Hamilton and the multispecies ethnographers as well as affective scholarship, I tried to bear the affective responses in mind as I conducted my research. I focused not only on the affect but also on the discomfort, feelings, and smell. This has enabled me to be more present in the participatory observation, as I shared a sensory environment with other participants. As Hamilton and Taylor conclude, there is “potential to treat mundane (and traditionally overlooked) spaces like parks, beaches and pavements as political, multifaceted and infused with ethnographic opportunity” (2017, 124). Hence my choice of Hermannplatz as a multi-modal sensory experience of opposing political practices and meanings. These are vital for challenging nature-culture binaries.

As Haraway (2003) proposes, thinking about naturecultures cannot be disentangled from questions about technology and its role in mediating the research space surfaces. Hamilton and Taylor cite different examples such as soundwalks, that can help record a variety of noises that are not audible or detectable by human ears, as our ears are trained to hear other noises, “that helps locate the researcher as part of rather than distinct from nature“ (Hamilton & Taylor, 2017, 117). The soundscapes are particularly poignant in a porous, erasing the boundaries between species way, as well as smells.

By following the route of socializing around food, I conducted my research at the café in Karstadt. As Annemarie Mol (2021) argues through her discussion of the history of philosophy through eating, the deeply ingrained sensual hierarchy in Western thinking devaluates senses like smell and taste. This underlines the aforementioned theory of sensory ethnology and provides a framework to understand, also from a philosophical perspective, how these senses have been continuously omitted. These “low” senses are called “too bodily, too material, too personal”. They are considered as



not having external contact with the other world, which the examples in her study demonstrate to be quite the opposite. Furthermore, it also reinforces ableist views.<sup>11</sup>

### **2.3. Interviews and archival research**

In autumn 2020, as a part of an artistic residency “Two Roots”, I conducted a series of short interviews and artistic interventions such as nature-culture-inspired photographs where I directed my performer as the “Henrietta” from Karstadt as part of a documentary film project.



Image 2: Photo project: Henrietta at the terrace of café Karstadt. Sept 2020. Credit by author

For this film project, I spoke with the visitors of the café on the terrace of Karstadt. The research for this thesis builds and expands on these interviews through participant observation.

I was conducting field work at Hermannplatz 4 times a week for 3 hours in the months of September 2022, February and March 2023. In total, I spent 10 weeks conducting participant observation. Over a period of 4 months in 2022 and 2023, I

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<sup>11</sup> Mol underlines these notions through neuroscientific research: the brain does not separate out ‘sense data,’ but integrates diverse sensorial signals into meaningful perceptions of the outside world.

carried out participant observation at the café at the top level at Karstadt at Hermannplatz. This method enabled a direct observation and engagement with my research participants. During the observation of the participants<sup>12</sup> I conducted 15 interviews with café visitors, some of them lasted 15 minutes, some 1 and a half hours. The interviewees were made up of pensioners, artists and employees. In 2020, I interviewed two artists, two Karstadt employees and one visitor at café Karstadt. These interviews focused on the affective values of architecture.

In 2023, 15 interviews were made with older (60+) women,<sup>13</sup> who, with one exception, were all retired and received a pension from the German state. I provide more information on their background in the research participant table. Often, the interviews were conducted with two women at once. The interviews lasted from 15 minutes to 1 and a half hours, with the majority lasting around 25 minutes. They took all place at the café in Karstadt. These women were usually friends and colleagues, some had met in the café, and one was there with her sister and her brother-in-law. We didn't exchange contacts to clarify further questions, but I kept seeing them and talking to them informally when visiting the café. I started these semi-structured interviews with two very general questions - "Why did you come here today", and "What do you know about (this) Karstadt?" and later moved on to discussing food, politics, life in the neighbourhood as well as green values. I made many additional interviews during the process both in 2020 (German-Arab construction workers) and 2023 (vegetable market employees, a young mother with two kids) but for the lack of space, I do not include these in my thesis.

Through the exposure to the everyday liveliness of Hermannplatz and the mundane world of the department store and the repetitive "coffee breaks" through which I carried out the fieldwork, I engaged not only my vision but also other senses (such as smells, noises) as well as my emotions. I challenged myself to look away from conceptions of Nature, binary thinking, and looked for ways to engage with non-human agents. It was a conscious process that I had to remind myself of. How do I write from

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<sup>12</sup> Another possibility would have been a "deeper" participatory observation, such as getting employed at the fruit market at Hermannplatz or directly at a cafe in Karstadt. I contemplated this prospect but finally decided against it for practical reasons (organizing internships in Germany can take months and is usually bound with lot of legal requirements that are not conclusive with my studies) and data security reasons (unclear what type of data I could use if I worked in the place, etc).

<sup>13</sup> I use women as self-defined gender category that was used by my interviewees.

the perspective of cement? I had oscillated between my feelings of foolishness at my attempts as well as my ambitions for a more-than-human research project.

During the research, I embraced the feminist commitment to make the relationship between the investigator and investigated less hierarchical, rather than regarding the researcher as an objective and neutral force. In order to explore the development of the gentrification process in more nuance, that is open to hidden stories of more-than-human interactions, I allowed my non-human and human research collaborators to help me guide the investigation and lead me to topics I might not be familiar with, such as the topic of cleanliness.

Name	Description	Date
MJ	Non-binary, 27, Artist from Sudan – USA, lives in NK	Sept 2022
Maciej	Man, 29, Artist from Poland, lives in Berlin-Mitte	Sept 2020
Sabine	Woman, 50s, lives in the neighborhood, more information undisclosed	Sept 2020
Elisabeth	Woman, mid-70s, pensioner lives in NK, used to work in a department store in NK	Mar 2023
Rita	Woman, mid-70s, pensioner lives in NK, used to work in a department store in NK	Mar 2023
Elfriede	Woman, mid-70s, from NK, pensioner, premium client at Karstadt	Mar 2023
Liane	Woman, early 70s, from Stuttgart, used to live in NK, now in Mitte, pensioner, former post office employee	Mar 2023
Elke	Woman, early 70s, from Bremen, lives in NK, pensioner, former post office employee	Mar 2023
Getrude	Woman, mid-80s, Latvian-German, grew up and lives in NK, pensioner, home maker	Mar 2023
Corinna	Woman, early 80s, from East-Berlin but lives in NK, pensioner, before service jobs	Mar 2023
Hanna	Woman, mid 80s, born in NK and lives here, pensioner, former homemaker	Mar 2023
Vera	Mid-60s, from East-Berlin but lives in NK, a nurse about to retire	April 2023

Meike	Late 60s, from East-Berlin but lives in NK, pensioner, former hospital employee (non-medical profession)	April 2023
Alia	Woman, 19, German-Palestinian, Karstadt employee,	Sept 2020

Table 1: Research participants

Table 1 presents the overview of my interviewees. Their names are pseudonyms. NK stands for Neukölln. All of these interviews took place at the café Karstadt. I provide only the information of the interviewees that I have directly quoted in the thesis.

#### **2.4. Data analysis**

For my thesis, I have chosen the method of discursive analysis of the collected data. Discursive analysis is a method used in many different forms. Katerina Zábrodská (2009) emphasizes that discourse analysis focuses on examining what is said, how it is said, and the resulting consequences. According to the author, this approach involves searching for variations and consistencies within the data which indicate the presence of a coherent and regulated system of meanings that highlights the objects of investigation (Zábrodská, 2009, 88). In the examined materials, I identified several types of discourses with different implications for my actors, focusing not only on explicit meanings, but on the contradictions or ambiguities of some statements and tension points.

During my field work, I audio-recorded all the analyzed interviews on my iPhone and later transcribed them at home. According to Hamilton & Taylor, the role of auditory technologies extends beyond merely mediating between players and narratives. Instead, they actively engage in the process of "re-composing" space, which results in defamiliarizing it and making it conducive to new interpretations and analyses (Hamilton & Taylor, 2017, 116-117). By transcribing my research interviews, I always discovered things that I didn't remember. By listening again, I could "catch" the various affects that had been created between myself and the research participants during the time of our interview. My personal feelings towards my participants also directly influenced which of the interviews I felt I wanted to transcribe first and which transcriptions I postponed. Listening back to the recorded interviews at home, it felt easier to pay closer attention to the meaning of their statements. I was always surprised how many details I didn't manage to register while we were talking, especially when talking to a person with speech difficulties, or regional German dialects such as

*Berlinerisch* or *Schwäbisch*. Sometimes after listening back, the answers of my participants got a different meaning from what I had concluded during the interview.

As my aim for this study was to use several methods of data acquisition, I was very interested in working with archival material and was hoping to include archival research as an added source. In January 2023, by using the keywords “Karstadt Hermannplatz” and adjacent words, I examined all historical material about Neukölln in Berlin public libraries that I was able to access. Reading archives as official sites of knowledge production built to preserve knowledge for future generations’ production (and notable the absences in archives<sup>14</sup>) (see Derrida&Prenowitz, 1996, Hartman, 2008), I looked for the occasional nature-culture encounters that have not been documented thoroughly in the historical publications about Karstadt. I searched extensively for images of the buildings of Karstadt and 19th and 20th photos of Hermannplatz that could be useful for adding historical perspective to my research. I read closely to observe affective responses of the emergence of Karstadt in Neukölln that were documented in these sources. Given my background in visual media, I made photos and videos of some of the interviews and impressions as well as sound recordings. Through the combination of fieldwork and interviews, I hope that this multimodal approach outweighs the possible limits of my research - the short time span and limited fieldwork.

## **2.5. Ethical concerns**

Feminist epistemologies have stressed the importance of locating the position of research. As Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002) note, ethical questions accompany the researcher throughout the whole process. The authors emphasize the importance of reflecting on personal relationships, similarities and differences between the subject and the researcher.

My position as a researcher impacted the research on many levels. The politics of location is based on the reflection of how one's subject position (identity) takes shape in and shapes the process of research, the awareness (transformation) of our privileges

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<sup>14</sup> Saidiya Hartman’s (2008) critical fabulation provides a productive research method. Hartman has presented this technique in the *Venus in Two Acts*. In order to research undocumented stories, Hartman proposes to use fabulation as a method to counteract the mainstream (racist and sexist) narratives that have presented the black inhabitants in the USA as criminals. Her method weaves in other perspectives coming from their possible life experience beside as a subject of police and other legal documents. Where there’s no documented evidence, she uses the method of fictional writing to “fill in the gaps”.

and differences to other subjects (Parente-Čapková 2005, 23). As I focus on more-than-human relationships, I can only relate from my human position and can only speculate on the non-human perspective. The research has been influenced by my personal commitment to queer feminism and current understanding and lived experience as a queer, non-binary person from a (low) middle-class background, who has lived as a foreigner for the majority of their adulthood. I was driven to speak to the women in the café and they opened themselves to me quite quickly. I can only speculate as to whether they had opened themselves to another person, but my privilege of being a young white person that was legible to them as a woman enabled me to do the interviews without problems.

A continuous process of self-reflection about privileges and limitations does not stop with the observation phase. At the beginning of my research project, my middle-class upbringing did not lead me to question too much who can afford to drink at this café, as going to restaurants has been a part of my socialization. I have been aware that not everyone can afford to visit these places but even the choice of the research site reflects the fact that places such as department stores make me feel familiar and comfortable.

By engaging in my fieldwork, I have had the chance to confront some of my educational and personal biases and reflect on some tensions that occurred during the process. First, I often felt inhibited by my inability to speak Turkish and Arabic, thus limiting the engagement with a certain group of citizens at Hermannplatz. Second, as I have been closely following the news about Karstadt and therefore felt a knowledge advantage over my participants, another common fear for me was not wanting to come across as condescending. At the same time, I felt strange for not sharing this type of knowledge about Karstadt and the political case, when my interviewees were speculating about what could happen, or when they did not have a lot of information at hand about the case. <sup>15</sup>I will illustrate this further with these two examples from my fieldwork:

An older couple that I never spoke to took away my laptop because they thought I was gone for too long (I was doing an interview with another person). They

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<sup>15</sup> Given the controversial situation of the current Hermannplatz, I am faced with the problem of how to deal with the owners of Karstadt. Upon reflection, I have decided not to contact the Karstadt company / SIGMA.

were scared that “ich bin umgeknickt auf der Toilette” [I have collapsed in the bathroom]. The employee took it under the desk and she’s happy to tell me that it’s all there “to the last penny”. (Fieldnote, 27.3 2023)

This incident let me feel the warm feeling of solidarity that I felt that the interviewees have together, that was described by the interviewees. This excerpt showed me that this place works as a cosmos for itself, a community.

I’m trying to make an interview with a man in his 60s sitting alone and drinking coffee. We do have a bit of difficulty communicating, I interpret it as their lack of German skills / my inability to speak Arabic. He passes me his Schwerbehindertenausweis (severely handicapped pass). (Fieldnote, 29.3 2023)

In this presented excerpt, I expected that the person would not understand me based on our language barrier. Yet it was my ableist assumption that did not make me consider his speech impediment first. Speech and different modes of communication have been the most challenging parts of the data analysis. The interviewees sometimes had a way of speaking that made the conversation quite meandering and it was hard for me to transcribe the feeling of hopelessness, and to follow the thread of meaning. I noticed that it was hard to extend empathy when the conversation went on for too long. Sometimes my voice cuts through their speech and interrupts my interviewees, which left me feeling ashamed and rude in retrospect.

The hardest for me was the case of one of the interviewees who had difficulties articulating (probably due to her two strokes). The whole interview with her was flooded with the experience of hopelessness and despair. I noticed that I did not transcribe the interview right after but kept working on other interviews. When the time to transcribe came, I would skip it for other interviews. Even though it was a very short one, I kept stopping and doing other things. It took me three days to transcribe it, even though it was only 15 minutes long.

By engaging in my fieldwork, I could experience the community feeling. By allowing me to participate in their coffee break, and to do interviews, I was allowed to be part of their community. When I shared good news about receiving positive feedback on my thesis, I became both the recipient and provider of support. That is also

in the end why these women I interviewed come here. The experience of the feeling of belonging is what makes me the participatory researcher in the process.

My biases did not stop at the methodological level. I experimented with recording audioscapes of Hermannplatz with the aim of analyzing them later, but I didn't use them – I felt ill-equipped to make any proper analysis, as well as prioritizing the interviews, despite my initial interest in challenging traditional ethnographic methods.



## CHAPTER 3:

### DISPLACEMENT AND BELONGING: THE MANY FACES OF KARSTADT AT HERMANNPLATZ

#### **3.1. Introduction**

Elizabeth Povinelli has said that every emergence presents an extinguishment (Povinelli, 173, 2016). In this thesis I examine how displacement and belonging of human and non-humans are negotiated within the boundaries of a metropolitan space. In the tradition of feminist nature-culture arguments, I study how capitalism, technology, nature and culture are entangled, taking the example of the building of Karstadt at Hermannplatz.

This chapter is concerned primarily with architecture and department store and its function in the political ecology (Latour&Porter, 2004). I have asked these questions: in which ways does Berlin city focus on green values in the city transformation harm the political ecology? How is displacement negotiated on affective level? What are the ways of living and public/personal space that get displaced?

This chapter shows how these narratives co-create a storied-place (van Dooren & Rose, 2012). The storied-places become storied by means of overlapping different narratives: the overlapping does not just layer new stories over, but the stories are dynamically emerging. They define story as a narrative created from subsequential and meaningful events. The crucial question becomes: who has the active voice and what stories come to matter? Following the danger of displacement, I attend to the concerns of retired women as well as artists and Karstadt employees, who are all visiting the spacious café on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor of Karstadt, and who fear losing their place of work, shopping or meeting. Within this fear, there is also a certain entitlement to having this place for themselves and towards a certain lifestyle.

In order to weave together these different narratives, I begin by presenting the current plan to rebuild Karstadt and give voices to its critics. I offer a short historical overview of the Neukölln neighbourhood (formerly Rixdorf) in which Karstadt is located, and briefly present the concept of a department store as a 19<sup>th</sup> century innovation. Following the business success of the German family Karstadt, I analyze the importance of the “flagship store” at Hermannplatz and offer an affective reading of how this place became of importance for the city of Berlin, and the neighborhood.

Coming to the present day, I contemplate why, when a company such as Karstadt is owned by one of the richest people in Europe and received funding from the Senate to maintain working spaces for 10 years (Wahmkow, 2023), is the Karstadt group going bankrupt? Why do they displace the goods on purpose and why do they build a café in a container in a parking lot despite having a 1000 square metre cafe with a rooftop terrace with a clientele which has been coming for years?

I jump in between the time periods to juxtapose echoes of the past because, I want to position myself against the linear storytelling, or “straight time” as José Muñoz (2009) would describe it- that SIGNA offers in its marketing strategies. Muñoz proposes that the metropolis in the present is tied to an implied yet unnamed "now," which necessitates the emergence of a distinct "then" that can be either regional or global (Muñoz, 2009, 29). Muñoz argues that queer time disrupts the linear progression of conventional time (33). Queer time transcends the straight time's linear trajectory, allowing for a different experience and understanding of temporal existence. This feeling extends beyond a singular moment and speaks to a unified and expansive sense of temporality. It invokes future generations, emphasizing a connection that surpasses immediate time boundaries. The global aspects of spatial organization have the potential to challenge the dominance of the "here," that is overshadowed by the nation-state and its ever-changing corporate interests (Muñoz, 2009, 29). While globalization of city-building (here through the company of SIGNA) signifies an exploitative system characterized by asymmetry, it also brings the "then" (such as Karstadt from 1929) closer to the "now". Meaning that certain affects hide in our storytelling of the present/past. Through affects, the stories can make these historical affects bigger (grandeur of Karstadt, that should survive in the future) or smaller (decay through the deliberate downsizing). By focusing on the affects, when regarding the past decades, these different modes of storytelling can be revisited.

Using the concepts of hybridity, critical race theory (brown commons, Muñoz 2020), belonging, displacement and capitalist ruins (Tsing, 2015), I offer an analysis of gentrification and the discourses connected with it. I analyze promotional brochures and social media marketing campaigns by SIGNA that depict the rebuilding plans, as well as my interviewees with local artists and the retired women who use Karstadt on a regular basis.

### **3.2. Who owns public space? Hermann and Henriette and the question of hybridity**

In this section, I am presenting the current Karstadt rebuilding scandal while following the concept of hybridity. As my literary overview has shown, the right to the city has been an important concept for critical geographers since the 1970s (see Lefebvre in Fenster, 2006). As contemporary research - such as Gandy's study (2019) about London's cemetery park - shows, the conflicting interests of internationally owned real estate, nature and architecture protection entities, as well as city councils, result in painful negotiations and stories of human and more-than-human displacement. The current question for me is not only who has the right to the city but who owns the city.

As someone living in Berlin today, I have witnessed firsthand how the city has transformed into a sought-after location for multinational corporations, creative industries, start-ups, and a major tourist destination. As Ross Beveridge, Markus Kipp and Heike Overmann (2022) note in their study on the architectural outline of Berlin, in terms of architecture, that marks a major shift in symbolic terms from the desolate postwar inner-city 'ruined landscapes' (*Trümmerlandschaften*) reflective of the void in German society resulting from National Socialism, the holocaust and defeat in war (Beveridge et al, 2022, 289). Considering the vast artistic and scholarly sources about Berlin in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (see Sandford, 2002, Wiedemann, 2019), Berlin became a home for many (inter)national artists and people seeking cheap rents and anti-capitalist visions for the future. With the pre-war industry long gone and the "economic miracle" (*Wirtschaftswunder*) taking place in Western Germany, the divided city on both sides of the Berlin Wall provided a lot of space for an alternative lifestyle. The political conditions of this period did not last and the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 and the reunification of Germany in 1990 brought the pressures of globalization to the fore and the city lost its uniqueness in speculation and nation- building (Beveridge et al, 2022).

In 2019, the first plans for the reconstruction of Karstadt at Hermannplatz were presented by its current owner SIGNA. With lofty statements, the developers promised a spectacular reconstruction in its exact original historical form from 1929, that was bombed out at the end of the WW2.<sup>16</sup> The developers promote as follows:

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<sup>16</sup> The official name of the entity is Galeria Karstadt Kaufhof as SIGNA has merched two department store chains.

Karstadt will thus regain its identity-forming architecture, which will strengthen its attractiveness. At the same time, this architecture creates new areas that enable a lively mix of uses, from which Karstadt will benefit. This new mix of uses creates new scope for living and working, as well as for offers that are oriented towards the common good, meet the needs of the growing city and its people. (Nicht ohne Euch [Facebook Post], 5. Sept 2019)

As a marketing strategy, the company used the personification of Hermannplatz and Karstadt - the characters Hermann (a metaphor for the square) and Henriette (a metaphor for the building), in an attempt to explain the planned transformation to the public by comparing Hermannplatz and Karstadt to a married couple, they want to strengthen the bonds between the building and the square. As they add, “by designing the entrance to the market hall in such a way that the clear separation between inside and outside is noticeably reduced, we are strengthening the overall quality of the space and building” (Hermann&Henriette, Juni 2020, 10). What would that mean for the inhabitants? A large construction site for 5-10 years and no department store for the time being. SIGNA aims to make the used building surface twice as big but at the same time to reduce the shopping area by half (Initiative Hermannplatz, Juli 2019). The rest of the space was intended to be used as a hotel, luxury apartments and a as prime event location on the terrace.

The first visualizations of the roof terrace appeared shocking to local architects and inhabitants of this largely non-white working class neighbourhood (Initiative Hermannplatz, Juli 2019). These renderings (image 3) offered a painted image of nostalgic, waltz-dancing white people in the style of the 1920s. In the summer of 2019, local activists formed the collective Initiative Hermannplatz and started to organize protests, distribute leaflets and expressed their criticism about the rebuilding plans in the local media. At the end of the summer of 2019, the Berlin Senate declined permission for this construction (Charta für das Berliner Grün, 2020), deeming it unsustainable and damaging for the borough of Neukölln, where the rents became 2,5 times more expensive in the last 10 years, the biggest rise in Berlin (Initiative Hermannplatz, July 2019).



Image 3: Renderings Karstadt Terrace. Source: David Chipperfield Architects (2019)

The Karstadt cause does not end with this veto. After the rebuilding permission was not granted, the Karstadt owner started a new invasive marketing campaign. After receiving initial criticism for their plans that seemed to ignore the necessities of the neighbourhood, the Karstadt owner responded with new renderings of the building: they presented a green strategy that was supposed to reflect the multi-cultural image of the neighbourhood. In this proposal, they changed their communication strategy to one resembling a more grassroots type of messaging with the “Not without you” campaign (Nicht ohne Euch [Facebook], 2022). To reduce the critical response from the existing community around Hermannplatz as well as to attract (potential) future clientele, Signa kept up an active Facebook<sup>17</sup> and Instagram campaign where they went into detail about various aspects of the reconstruction such as the ecological impact or architectural value, as well as the promotion of concerts and happenings at the lot. I have identified two strands of arguments in this new strategy: community and sustainability.

We want to offer much more than a department store. Karstadt is an important meeting space. Hermann and Henriette should form a modern center in the neighborhood. We want to positively influence the mobility habits of the neighborhood and strengthen social interaction (SIGNA 8. Juni 2020, 12)

They indicated that the reconstruction would benefit the whole community, and presented the new place as “future-oriented”, and “a place of diversity” (SIGNA, 2019, 12), that would enhance community habits. In this argument, SIGNA referred to the role of the department store in cities. The development of department stores was linked to the industrial-urban growth in the 19th century of large population centres, transportation,

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<sup>17</sup> These frequent posts have received mixed reviews ranging from agreement and excitement about the new building to outrage. Since 2022, the accounts don’t seem to have been updated.

and the harnessing of electricity for power and lighting (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2022). Department stores meant a new way of selling goods – instead of negotiating prices and writing goods on credit, the customers were guaranteed a new price but had to pay immediately (Rappaport, 1996). As Helmut Frei (1997) posits, many of them started out as family businesses but hugely expanded and became capitalist flagships. The capitalistic principles were apparent. A department store embodied social and cultural changes and played a key role in nineteenth-century modernity. As I aim to demonstrate in my subsequent pages, for my interviewees, the role of the department store as an important hub has survived till today.

In the present day, after ongoing criticism from Initiative Hermannplatz and the Berlin media (Lindemann, 2019), the developer brought new arguments for the necessity of rebuilding. They argued that the building was unsustainable in its current form. They highlighted the unused space (such as the currently vacant parking lot), high energy consumption and an overall “negative environmental effect” (SIGNA Juni 2020, p.12) as well as declining sales numbers. Around the same time, the Berlin Senate announced a new strategy for sustainable development in the city of Berlin (Charta für das Berliner Grün, 2020) that has included strategies for reducing automobile traffic, among other proposals. The strategy of the Karstadt branch has accounted for this sustainability measurement in its rebuilding plans and expressed the aim to make Hermannplatz car-free as a part of their reconstruction. They claim that this project is going to be “an ecological, social and sustainable project with a highly efficient energy concept, a mobility concept for the traffic turnaround at the location, a sophisticated urban mining strategy and the early involvement of all project participants” (Signa, Juni 2020, p. 14). The details as to how this would exactly remain car-free remain unclear. Their attempts connect well with the proposal to make Berlin car-free.

At the future Hermann/Henriette’s place, general car traffic will not be allowed. At the present moment, Hermannplatz is known for its heavy traffic, framed on all four sides by busy streets. The developer therefore deems Hermannplatz as “a place with a low quality of stay” (SIGNA, Juni 2020, p. 14) from which the current Karstadt building can only be reached by crossing a busy intersection. Their proposal aims to strengthen a different kind of mobility. They claim that walking, which they consider an “underrated form of movement”, and biking, being the preferred way of locomotion, “can bring the place, the building and the people together”. According to the Karstadt owners, walking and cycling are the most sustainable and relaxed forms of locomotion.

They add: “If you don't shield yourself in the car, you meet, create points of contact and get to know each other” (SIGNA, Juni 2020, p.16). What about older people and people with limited mobility? This proposal ignores the fact that Hermannplatz is a place of work for so many people.

Even though SIGNA only owns the building, they expand their renovation plans to include the whole square. It goes hand in hand with the tendency of big real estate aggressively changing the way cities look. Their proposal gains power by aligning with political green directives. The green aspirations connect not only to the space but also to the exterior of the building. The parking lot adjacent to Kartstadt became a centre of their promotional activities, which aim to connect with the neighbourhood. The additional features they have proposed to offer included a new café in the backyard, urban gardens and other green spaces at the vacant parking lot, concerts with local musicians, a DIY bicycle workshop, art exhibitions at Karstadt, and beach soccer or volleyball for the children in the neighbourhood. To showcase their commitment to biking as a tool of movement, they have built a short biking lane at their parking lot space, that was festively inaugurated by the mayor of Neukölln in 2019.

This new form of proposal that connects to the neighbourhood can be understood as a form of greenwashing. Feminist scholars such as Natalie Oswin (2008) argued against the perspective of upper-class white cis heterosexual men who are trying to take on the responsibilities of saving underprivileged inhabitants and places. The green saviorism is apparent in the project: they offer to fix aspects of the community, that nobody has asked for. In the understanding of historians and activists, the local community does not need SIGNA. Furthermore, it is questionable how much substantial effort hides behind these proclamations. To take an example, SIGNA has promised to start a lot of activities such as conducting a survey with commuters about their means of transport and the quality of their experience, but this is not actually happening. So far, there is no quantitative research or any guarantee or measurement of how much of these activities will happen.

Karstadt at Hermannplatz and the conflicts about the forms of its preservations have shown a range of conflicting stakeholders, plans and understandings of history and the role of architecture. In terms of architecture, Karstadt owners are adamant about rebuilding the building in its original form. The values of timeless beauty and clean aesthetics make it easier to promote the reconstruction of this building. Beauty is something that is understood in a way that is divorced from the socio-economic and

ecological reality of the place. The contemporary building is described as ugly, and this new-old architecture could propose a clear *genius loci*: history becomes a commodity. A new building can bring more commercial space, as well as the “originality and authenticity” of the building can make it more justifiable to ask for more rent for the use of the space.

The new Karstadt represents a hybrid of new and old architecture, authentic history with modern reconstruction. On the outside, there is the historical facade, on the inside, the actual use of the building stays nebulous in the way that neoliberal capitalistic machinations do. Karstadt is what is usually called prime real estate. The repurposing of (former) department stores in Berlin is nothing new, such as can be demonstrated on the example of the “Tacheles”. As Stefan Schilling (2016) chronicles, the former department store Friedrichspassagen was used by Nazis and by the GDR government, and in the 1990s became a subcultural artistic squat. Later it was sold to an international real estate group with the aid of credit from the government. The original plan was to build new flats in the building. The artistic community of Tacheles was evicted in 2012, and till today, there’s no exact plan of usage or visible changes on this property.

Anita Blessing (2012) describes this process as hybrid: it is a multi-use construction in a neoliberal structure that does not at all take into focus the locality of the space, but at the same is made possible through the call to the authenticity of historical value. Hybrid structures merge communal and profitable functions. This state/market dualism continues to dominate the conceptual landscape of rebuilding projects in Berlin and other capital cities. It shows the power of large corporations that can afford to attempt to connect the commercial space and the urban space in one project. As this example shows, in neoliberal conditions investors are not held accountable for the claimed purpose of the reconstruction. Similar to Tacheles, the purpose of use of the new Karstadt remains unclear. In real estate terms, the building located in the heart of Southwest Berlin bears a wasted and unused potential.

To strengthen the quality of Hermannplatz, SIGNA promised an open food court on the ground floor, playground equipment, seating and greenery on the square, thereby increasing the permeability from space to building. The exterior design should be reflected in the interior of the building and tie in with the greenery and seating. Concealed as “green”, the hybridity that they propose can be considered in its viscous porosity (Tuana, 2008) on a material level, where the external surroundings (city) and



the private (Karstadt) cannot be disentangled. According to the Karstadt owner, Hermann and Henriette should enhance each other and become mutually unified.

In this subchapter, I have introduced the basic outline of the Karstadt renovation projects as well as the current city politics. I have argued that the process of erasing boundaries between public and commercial space can be viewed through the concept of hybridity. In the next part, I introduce the critical voices around the Karstadt reconstruction in more depth.

### **3.3. Voices of critics: from monumentality to a green and inclusive space**

The criticism of this supposedly green, inclusive and architecturally intriguing rebuilding plan has been multi-layered. For this subchapter, I will delve in-depth into the criticism, and examine how the concepts of greenwashing effect the displacement at Karstadt. I examine how the focus on green values can harm the political ecology (Latour, 2004). I trace the proposals from the focus on monumentality to green values.

In an attempt to break down the (former SIGNA campaign) argument of monumentality, I lay an overview of the aspects of the monumental values. I argue that the Karstadt building from the 1920s conveys nationalist, colonialist and heteronormative values. I will explain these arguments in detail in the subsequent paragraphs. The first rendered images in the architecture studio brochures the building are designed to appeal to a white (upper)middle class audience, despite the place being situated in a largely non-white neighbourhood with a strong queer population<sup>18</sup>. According to the historian of architecture Niloufar Tajeri (2020), Karstadt architecture is symbolically calling for the return of Germany to the Weimar era, the “golden years” that were followed by the rise of National Socialism. Using the metaphor of Hermann and Henriette offers a very white, straight image that does not adhere to the audience of the building.

When I was talking to the people visiting the café Karstadt in 2020 and in 2023, the opinions about the architectural values varied. While some of my interviewees were inspired by the architectural beauty, others could not identify with the historical narrative that this project would bring about a positive change. In the nationalistic imagination, the building can be used as a container for different values as an archival

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<sup>18</sup> I did not find any statistics to support my lived experience as a queer person in Neukölln. The existence of several bars (Silver Future) and clubs (Schwuz, Loophole) as well as informal cruising locations and the anti-capitalist queer pride starting at Hermannplatz every June hopefully speak for themselves.

of the past. It is a reminder of a culture of loss and wanting to forget certain historical occurrences, namely the time of WW2.

It [renovation according to 1926-1929 architecture]harkens back to this history of dormant kind...nationalism [...] I mean Berlin, half of it was bombed to the ground. So this kind of artistic architectural history was lost. I can see why there're people who try to reclaim it... but it's a bit ugly to me. maybe they want to rebuild this pre-war greatness, wipe a little of the shame, the guilt... to bring back architecturally the pre-war situation. I would imagine that this historically makes sense, for the identity of German people. As a foreigner, I have no idea what this kind of anguish could feel like for people who are German. And you know of course, it was bombed and people died[...] But actively killing people of Jewish descents and like homosexuals... it's not like it was pretty on their side either. So there's a chance to actively look away from that[...] But if they're gonna look into the 1920s, the conditions of 1920s led to these things that actively got the city bombed (Interview with MJ, American-Sudanese artist, 15.9.2020)

MJ introduced themselves to me as a black American artist who grew up in Brooklyn after spending their childhood in West Africa, at the rooftop terrace of café Karstadt on an exceptionally hot day in September 2020. MJ was sitting in Karstadt with their Polish friend Maciej, also an artist. At the time, Maciej and MJ were both in their late 20s and did not live in the direct vicinity of Hermannplatz but the two of them had met to discuss a performance project at the terrace. As queer foreigners who live in Berlin long-term, they do not see any identification with the pre-WW2 time that was followed by the rise of Nazi ideology that actively killed queer people and promoted Arian whiteness.

In the promotional materials of SIGNA, there is a linear historical storytelling presented in events such as the Karstadt 2019 exhibition Kiezzestein that does not question the actual protests against the building of Karstadt nor discrepancies about its architectonic value nor the important facts around the close Nazi collaboration of Karstadt AG that has, through various business credits made it possible for the company to survive through WW2. To strengthen the architectural identity-value character of Karstadt, one of the online PR activities of the project was making Berlin monuments disappear to highlight their importance to the cityscape, and attempting to firmly root

Karstadt among them. In their posts (Nicht Ohne Euch, [Facebook]) they show images of the city without iconic buildings such as the Alexanderplatz TV tower. Among them, of course, was Karstadt at Hermannplatz. With this marketing strategy, they place an equality sign between city landmarks and a fully commercially used property such as Karstadt. Without pointing to historical consequences and processes, a Karstadt Facebook post proposed:

Not all of them survived the turmoil of war, reconciliation, revolution and reconstruction - Karstadt was blown up by the Nazis. Once a landmark of a proud cosmopolitan city, the department store fell victim to an explosion by the SS in the last year of the war in 1945. From the 1950s it was gradually rebuilt, later expanded and renovated. A constant change (Nicht ohne Euch, Facebook Post, 1. 12 2020)

These statements and language about Karstadt being bombed and “falling victim” conceal the fact that it was bombed due to its involvement with the Nazi government. The glory of Karstadt in the 1920s was short-lived. According to Lothar Uebel (2000), inflation and unemployment were high in the 1930s, but Karstadt focused on expanding the business. In 1932, two stores were closed and 2000 people were made redundant (Uebel, 2000). By the end of WWII, only 1000 people worked at Karstadt with contracts with a one-day notice period. A lot of Karstadt stores all over Germany were closed.

Uebel (2000) claims that, in the early-1930s, Karstadt announced that they were bankrupt in order to get another credit from the government, otherwise it would have gone insolvent. They let go of Jewish employees and chose a close collaboration with the Nazi party that ensured financial continuity, and made them one of the few department stores who survived. During the boycott in 1933, Karstadt remained open due to its loyalty to the Nazi government (e.g. advertising for the 1936 Olympics) and stayed in business due to their dismissal of Jewish employees. By the end of the war, it was rewarded by the NS regime. As Karstadt so closely cooperated with the Nazi government, it was expected that it would become a target of a military attack. Karstadt was in competition with other department stores such as KaDeWe (built in 1907). As KaDeWe and most other department stores were run and owned by Jewish businessmen, Karstadt was at an advantage. For that reason, they established a fire

guard that was on guard for possible attacks (Uebel, 2000, 300). Even the intricate fire system could not help to protect the Karstadt building at Hermannplatz from a complete collapse. On May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1945, there was a fire at Karstadt, with further conditions remaining unexplained, just a week before the German unconditional surrender on May 9<sup>th</sup>, 1945.



Image 4: Karstadt during the Olympics in 1936. fortepan / Lőrincze (1936) Image 5: Karstadt after bombing in 1945. Pisarek (May 1945).

The Facebook marketing points to the division between blurring the historical line between perpetrators and the victims, as Karstadt appoints themselves as a victim of war despite having played an active role in it through their engagement with the Nazi government, and have always been a strong for-profit entity. In Karstadt's strategy, the focus on the affective power of beauty leads to the concealment of pain, that is still part of German identity. Tajeri (2020) calls this the "cementing of neoliberalism" and she proposes that precisely this type of historical interpretation makes architectural alternatives impossible. What is presented as timeless architectural beauty is strongly tied to the history of nation-building, and active dismissal of historical consequences. By remembering the times of the "Roaring Twenties" as they are often called in the promotional materials, the feelings of guilt and shame for WW2 from the position of Germany become displaced. As well as knowledge, values of monumental beauty are not universal, but situated in context and dependent on positionality. There is a scepticism about the need for the monumentality of Karstadt at Hermannplatz.

Secondly, the values that this architecture bears can be considered colonialist – by returning to the US-American art deco style, reminiscent of capitalist US-American architecture built on land stolen by European colonizers from American indigenous

inhabitants. The Karstadt historian Lothar Uebel (2000) describes this style as “style Karstadt” that can have a comparison not only with American art-deco architecture. With its imposing pillars, it reminds of sacral structures of Gothic cathedrals or expressionist town halls. SIGNA is an international company in Western Europe that disposes with a lot of capital. It is no coincidence that the SIGNA company also owns some of the New York art deco landmarks such as the Chrysler building.

By reconstructing the original building, for some of its visitors who do not fit into the image of a white middle class audience, the rebuilding of Karstadt can lose its charm and the beauty standards are very different. For Maciej and MJ, the building of Karstadt is a direct legacy of colonialism.

Maciej: This is the beauty of Berlin that it doesn't have this. Because it was wiped out, it doesn't have this imperialist look. When you go to Paris or Vienna, people get really impressed by this but I have a feeling of like wow you stole all this, you made this out of people's poverty

MJ: There're lots of places that are wiped off from the Earth in the global South, lots of libraries destroyed... places like Timbuktu are raided of their knowledge and architecture.. they were actually actively destroyed, for the project of colonialism, white supremacy, capitalism basically subjugation. Berlin is different because this place has a lot of money. (MJ and Maciej, Interview 15. September 2020)

As my interview between Maciej and MJ points towards, every imperial building is a site of displacement or erasure. Unlike places in the global South, Berlin's current geopolitical location makes it a safe destination of investment. With the exhibitions and promotion of Karstadt as a place of culture and positive historical relevance for Berlin history, in the tourist promotion it bears a value that has to be preserved.

Following the campaign's progression from grandeur to ecological principles, I now lay down the arguments that are against the reconstruction of Karstadt. First, the plan can be considered unecological (as will be discussed further in Chapter 4). The existing building will be torn down, and the new construction will require immense resources. Second, the process has been regarded as unethical since the proprietor had

been granted permission to rebuild despite public protests, and the construction plan is not adhering to city building regulations (Initiative Hermannplatz, July 2022). Last but not least, the Karstadt owners have been accused of greenwashing (e.g. using their attempt of planting new trees or starting a small urban garden as offsetting the ecological impact) in their plans for revitalisation. I will address these objections in turn.

The current political negotiation around the (re)building permit is similar to the one in the early 1920s. As Lothar Uebel (1995) posits, at the time it was built, the building of Karstadt was considered inappropriate for the neighbourhood but was in the end approved. It was considered large, and not needed. Several houses in the neighbourhood had to be torn down (Stanic, 1985). Rudolf Karstadt first started his shopping business in 1881 in Northern Germany, after WW1, and expanding to Berlin was an important development in his strategy. The building permit was a compromise between the city of Berlin and Karstadt. Rudolf Karstadt wrote a letter to the building inspectorate outlining the benefits and demands – and as a trade-off, he offered to finance a school project building (Lenz, 1995, 120). The arguments that were presented are similar to the PR campaign of today – topics like promised accessibility, and value for the cosmopolitan city. When Karstadt started the construction in the 1920s, they connected it to the mobility project – U-bahn [Subway] construction that connected not only the working-class neighbourhood in the South of Berlin with the rest of the city, but also placed Karstadt as the new flagship store on the map of Berlin. The accessibility was enhanced by the newly revived tramlines that had been demolished during the cold war division of Berlin to East and West Berlin.

The third point of criticism is its inaccessibility and the potential destruction of the local ecology which I aim to demonstrate with the excerpt from another interview. The aspects of financial and infrastructural accessibility are strongly connected with the green values that are promoted by Karstadt's proposal of making this place car-free. My interviewees pointed to the following problems. When the women and artists discussed the renovation plan, they articulated that the accessibility and affordability of this place would sharply decline. MJ and Maciej told me:

MJ: They're framing it as eco-friendly but who are the people who bring their cars here? It's not because they have money. It's maybe that they live on the outskirts of Berlin and are just trying to get to work. They're not gonna try to

ride their bike everywhere. Or maybe also think about the people who are riding their bikes.

Maciej: It will still be crowded but crowded with tourists. Before it was a place for regular people to live in.

MJ: Maybe it's gonna be less crowded because they will push poor people further away from the centre basically

Maciej: It's gonna be for people who have money. I guess it's for like, a more cosmopolitan crowd. I guess it could be even for me. But I don't have money, not to spend. It's for like these new cosmopolitan people who're moving to Berlin. Maybe more tacky people I would say

MJ: Whenever people say accessible, it becomes so less accessible [...]. Accessibility in this sense is always already for people who already have the means, comfort, all this stuff. Accessibility is for rich people, basically. It's never thinking about the actual community who are already here so they could access this place better and making a cheaper store downstairs, you know.

(Interview Maciej and MJ, 15. 9. 2020)

Maciej and MJ mention an important aspect. Any potential benefits are largely relegated to young, upper or middle class, white, gender-conforming individuals. The current Berlin government touts its green values that do not clash with neoliberalism, but which embrace a neoliberal economy with a varying focus on “green” values. Yet my interviewees feared that the reconstruction would mean that the accessible “green” area such as the terrace garden which they often use for relaxation would close down. In practice, these rebuilding proposals solidify patriarchal assumptions about travel, mobility and urban organization. The supposed benefits do not outweigh gentrification's practical, high cost. Even though the terrace might be enhanced and planted with flowers, the access to it for the regular citizens will mostly likely be diminished.

In the plans of SIGNA, the planned urban garden would offer an alternative to the roof terrace. Initially in 2019, they built a container café called Hermannbox in the parking lot that was later renamed Café Pala, referring to the utopian fictional island from Aldous Huxley's novel from 1962. When I pass by, the café sign lures passers-by into a place of greenery “Come by and enjoy a wonderful time on the roof of the café oasis - where, by the way, the team has provided a lot of new greenery” (Field Note, January 2023). Yet when I talk to the retired women who use café Karstadt on daily

basis, they did not seem to be impressed by this idea. To illustrate the claims, I add two separate accounts from two interviewees.

R: This garden will be integrated, that's not bad, but it's not necessary either. There already is a big park here. There is a lot more greenery around it and also the canal. (Rita, 20. March 2023)

V: But an urban garden may be attractive. Everyone wants something that is not "normal", to clamp everything that is not so important (Vera, 3. April 2023)

In the understanding of my interviewees, the accessibility will not be enhanced, only erased. In the same vein, the accessibility of Hermannplatz without cars seems to be unrealistic. These women, in both interviews, consider the urban garden to be a marketing strategy. I discuss the garden in depth in the second chapter. By focusing on the innovation and greenness, this has meant that other aspects and priorities get neglected. The focus on a garden had been part of the strategy of getting a building permit already in the 1920s. When it comes to the urban garden in 2020, there has been another point of criticism. SIGNA proposed the Karstadt urban garden as a trip suggestion but the other urban gardens such as Prinzesinnengarten distanced themselves in media from being mentioned by SIGNA as a suggestion for an excursion because of SIGNA's Greenwashing (Ohne uns, 23.09.2020). In the vein of the community urban gardens, I question why there is not more attention to community-led urban gardens in other places in Neukölln. Establishing a miniature version of an urban garden in the parking lot at Karstadt aims to conceal the ecological impact of the construction.

In this section I have delved into the aspects of the arguments of monumentality. I have demonstrated that in the past monumentality was the argument driving the reconstruction but after that, green values replaced this as the argument driving the reconstruction communication by SIGNA. The declarations by my research participants as well as the accounts in the media have shown that the planned renovation are considered as an example of greenwashing.



### **3.4. Displacement as gentrification**

As I have indicated in the previous subchapter, the rebuilding plans and values present a danger of displacement. In this section, I want to further strengthen the argument between critical race theory, class, activism and eco-gentrification.

Neukölln, where Karstadt is located, is a working class district. Historically, as Neil Smith (1996) in his study of gentrification about American cities argues, parts of the city that primarily housed the working class and people of colour, were both implicitly and explicitly ignored. My interviewees described Neukölln in the following way:

Neukölln used to be a craft district. Completely characterized by craft businesses and that has now been completely removed. The backyards always had small factories and cowsheds with fresh milk until the 70s. And then it was lost. (Interview with Elfriede, 27. March 2023)

As my participants described, Neukölln has changed significantly over the last decades. Once the neighbourhood is identified as worth investing in, the diverse profile of the neighbourhood tends to disappear and the neighbourhood stops being affordable for the long-term residents. As Dorota Stanic (1985) notes in her history publication about Neukölln “Sand in Getriebe”, young women moved into Neukölln (formerly Rixdorf) because they could not afford to live in the inner city. Forced by the economic situation, they moved to this village, Rixdorf for the farming land and affordable housing. The influx of young mothers was countered by young women who were looking for a social upswing by moving from Rixdorf/Neukölln to other, more affluent parts of Berlin such as Charlottenburg. German-Turkish and German-Arab families have lived in Kreuzberg and Neukölln since the 1960s during the Gastarbeiter:innen [migrant workers] era of the mid-century (Stanic, 1985). When making my interviews in 2020, some of my interviewees mentioned gentrification directly, when I asked about the change in the neighbourhood. These are excerpts from two (separate) interviews:

Gentrification, that’s always gonna happen in these kind of places. I grew up in Brooklyn, it’s kind of like the same thing. Things get redeveloped. Artists move in and then it’s like a trendier neighborhood. And there’re like this is so

queer, this is so progressive. And then slowly but surely people with money move in. (Interview with MJ, 15. Sept 2020)

When someone comes with his thick wallet, a few Neukölln citizens don't have much to say about that. You have a neighbourhood that is really rooted and where there are established structures, and you only let a small side street change its face, which draws in other interested parties, another audience, and then it's already happening. Neukölln is not a rich district. No rich people live here. (Interview with Sabine, 29. September 2020)

Sabine, a woman in her 50s likes to read on the terrace of Karstadt, and comes almost every day in the summer months. When I spoke to her and MJ (separately) about the changes in the neighbourhood, I could not help but notice that their opinions did not take into account the personal power that citizens have in urbanisation processes, especially those with artistic capital. I agree that gentrification cannot be stopped. This is something that all the studies that I have read confirm. As Mount (2020) and others note, gentrification rarely happens without resistance. There has been active and passive protest, such as by the activists organizing protests and meeting every Tuesday for open discussions with the public. As Tajeri (2020) argues, in Kreuzberg and Neukölln no permission was given to build a Google headquarters. Tajeri documents how in a city like Berlin this will be more difficult exactly because of the civil organization. Maciej also mentioned the case of Tempelhoferfeld and the referendums that made it impossible to use the former airport for luxury apartments but ensured that it was kept as a park for the community. As accounts of aggressive renovations in cities like New York (see Schulman, 2012) or London (see Gandy, 2019) confirm, gentrification does not happen without resistance. Even if activism cannot always stop the process, civil activism has a tremendous effect on the process of gentrification.

The argument about artists and gentrification as mentioned by both Sabine and MJ remains contested. As stated by Sara Schulman (2012), the correlation between the AIDS crisis and gentrification in New York, artists are not the gentrifiers as they rarely have the financial means to change the neighbourhood. I do think that, in her account, she relates to a specific time of artists living in New York where the artistic economy functioned in its own circles based on solidarity and largely outside mainstream audiences. I imagine that this was also the case in Berlin before the unification.

Some of the artists who move to Berlin nowadays are people with significant means and class privilege that can afford to pay the expensive rents or meals in coffee shops. Having mentioned that, I do think that Sabine's statement about no rich people living in Neukölln can be contested, as a lot of Neukölln inhabitants were already displaced in the last decades. As other accounts of urban revitalization propose, the presence of artists also brings with it other opportunities for grassroots renovations, and community art projects (Kirksey et al, 2014). In Berlin, a lot of artists engage in activist projects and make use of the available resources such as vacant projects.

A variety of artists also engage in environmental activism. Green activism at this point has a lot of momentum (Scheitle, 2020). As activists against the rebuilding of Hermannplatz stress that this project is unecological, green values do have the potential to motivate others to be interested in the Karstadt case. At the same time, it enables SIGNA to persuade an interested, non-activist audience who misread their project as ecological. Activism is effective as a motivator of change but it is important to note that one of the problems they face are lack of funds. As Sabine mentioned, the activities do not have the resources that SIGNA has in terms of time and people to do infrastructural work as the Karstadt case shows. To illustrate this further: in order to run their activities, Initiative Hermannplatz has overtaken a former potato kiosk, but first they needed to clean it in order to be able to work. Significant covert efforts are dedicated to the pursuit of activism.

As indicated by the preceding subchapter, the activities of Initiative Hermannplatz resulted in SIGNA changing their strategy twice. I do not think that it is a coincidence that Karstadt chose to implement this grassroots DIY aesthetics for its urban marketing and urban gardens. As this is something usually connected to community activities, this might confuse people who are not familiar with the Karstadt case, and who can think that this is a mutual collaboration, as I proposed in the subchapter with the network of urban gardens.

[urban development] is also a racialized thing. So like white people, people with money move in, they feel safer in these neighbourhoods and then you know things starts to develop. Redevelop. And then people get priced out. It depends on the change and where the change needs to come. Because when we speak about this white, heteronormative society, the change within. What motivation of change would they have? The system is made for them and with

them. Would you ever make any change? And where would this change within come from? The change always comes from somewhere else. (Maciej, 15. September 2020)

There is a lot of evidence that supports Maciej's claim. Gentrification has racial and heteronormative connotations to it. The process of gentrification often upholds patriarchal family and land-use practices and thwarts the potential for alternative living styles (Curran 2018). As noted by both Curran (2018) and Schulman (2012) development plans are dominated by white men with overwhelmingly masculinist, business-oriented growth agendas. This agenda guides housing and labour policy, leading to policies that favour single, young, urban professionals uninterested in child-bearing at the cost of families and communities. As Kirksey and team (2014) account in their Multispecies study, there are possibilities for other scenarios. In the aftermath of hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, artists and community organizers were positive about the revitalization of the area, yet fearful of the possible effects of an unwanted gentrification that would lead to further displacements unevenly affecting the most vulnerable non-white population, already hit hard by the hurricane (Kirksey et al, 2014, 51). Yet temporary funding as well as coalitions with official institutions led to productive collaborations with property owners and helped to keep the influx in housing prices and negative effects of gentrification to a minimum.

While white men have dominated urban planning, women and queer folks have historically dominated urban resistance, and regularly transform oppressive structures through creative, confrontational community work. Examples in Berlin include the women-led leaflet action that promoted the fight against the Nazis in Karstadt in the 1930s (Lenz, 1995). Furthermore, there were squats and active political centres with queer-feminist agendas such as the recently evicted Liebig34 in Friedrichshain (Flakin, 2020) or the Kreuzberg Schokoladenfabrik ("40 Jahre Schokofabrik", n.d.), that is centred around protecting the interests of local women of Turkish and Arabic background. These community actors build on lived histories of resistance in order to transform the political and cultural meanings of abandoned and neglected spaces, thereby uplifting, revitalizing, and transforming the city. Maciej mentioned to me the Berlin project of Global Village in Neukölln (Berlin Global village, n.d.) where the motivation to build a multicultural centre comes as a result of many dialogues before the construction and on behalf of representatives of the communities rather than their

engagement with a community as an attempt to revoke the decision of the city of Berlin. As the experiences in New Orleans (Kirksey et al, 2014) and London (Gandy, 2019) demonstrate, ongoing cooperation between city councils, activists, community representatives and nature protection services, as well as property owners, are crucial to ensure multi-faceted urban belonging.

At Hermannplatz, the materiality of the bodies that are supposed to move here according to the SIGNA's official promotional brochures (SIGNA, Hermann und Henriette, Juni 2020) is different bodies than the brown commons (José Muñoz, 2020). It is the identity of the individual who is represented in the promotional brochure. According to Muñoz, individuals' brownness is determined by their accent, race, and migration status. Muñoz associates brownness with a vulnerable spatial condition, often related to precarious migrant statuses. Brownness signifies ordinary practices and lifestyles that imply a sense of illegitimacy. These practices and lifestyles are characterized by an abundance of affective experiences, ways of living, relationships, and existence that are not easily understood or accepted by the dominant culture. As a result, they are often pathologized, disregarded, ridiculed, judged, or even attacked.

However, brownness also encompasses acts of resistance within the shared space, representing a form of collective defiance and resilience, rather than solely being associated with harm. Passing Hermannplatz, the most vivid associations are street sales, waste, pigeons and the chaotic outline of Hermannplatz that make the place unmarketable. The people selling vegetables are not supposed to be there. The racial diversity in the promotional material is only used to promote the place as international. In this sense, their brownness represents their ethnicity as an attribute, a cosmopolitan attire rather than a justification of their presence in numbers. Marketing in this way can also attract a different level of tourists that will understand Germany as diverse, en par with other places like London or New York. For SIGNA, it is not the brown body per se that is the problem, it is the mass, the brown commons, the in-common-of the brown community, who use the space for their own purposes such as selling vegetables.

For the interviewees, rebuilding of Karstadt in this way is considered a threat to the existing community lifestyles, and a missed opportunity of engaging the community, and bring lasting change. Many interviewed people wish for different changes and proposed other areas of investment. In all the interviews that I have conducted, people alluded to a strong need for community and solidarity, instead of just an investment into grandeur such as historical redesign that was not in line with what

people in the community wanted. Despite SIGNA's claim about the positive change for the neighbourhood, none of my interviewees felt that the reconstructed Karstadt would bring them any positive change.

Yet despite SIGNA's self-proclaimed connection to the community, it does not seem to make any change for the participants. Destruction and rebuilding are inherently linked to displacement and belonging. Belonging, as Nira Yuval-Davis (2006) reminds us, extends beyond social contexts and the formation of individual and group identities and connections. Belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2006, 203) encompasses the assessment and valuation of these attachments. In parallel, it involves particular attitudes and ideologies that dictate the delineation and inclusivity/exclusivity of identity and categorical boundaries.

SIGNA has attempted to encompass the diversity of Hermannplatz's citizens and identify their needs. In the updated brochure (SIGNA, 9. Juni 2020), they have identified: long-term residents, families, kids, the homeless, the urban international crowd, workers, local tourists, and vacationers. At a first notion, there doesn't seem to be any exceptions.

Upon a further look into these descriptions, it becomes apparent that the engagement with the categories is very superficial. SIGNA's studies do not take into account any other categories such as gender, race, class, their groups are quite homogeneous, and differ from each other only through categories such as age, or if they're considered local. The 'long-term residents', particularly older women who frequented the existing café, are the respondents I interviewed for my study. As SIGNA notes in the discussed brochure, these people do indeed have an emotional connection to the location and appreciate the existing infrastructure and the close proximity of services. As the theories of displacement show (Elliott-Cooper, A., Hubbard, P., & Lees, L., 2020), there is a necessity to talk to the citizens from the lower classes. I would add that this extends to any vulnerable group, such as elderly people. To illustrate this further, Elfriede, one of my interviewees told me proudly that she was "a premium client" of Karstadt, and was present at frequent meetings about the future Karstadt, organized by SIGNA, she wasn't asked about her opinions nor did she find out any specifics. Furthermore, my interviewees of color expressed scepticism about the possibility of improvement of the current state coming from a big investor.

In this subchapter, I have shown how displacement in an urban gentrification aspect are racialized, and how accounts of eco-gentrification harm the local community,

yet how gentrification rarely happens without resistance. As I will explain in Chapter 4, the agency of non-human actants is vital. This chapter has been focusing on anthropocentric accounts of resistance. I haven't found any current examples of more-than-human resistance except for plants, if they're unattended, and the plans for rebuilding Karstadt will be discussed in this long process, there might be a potential for a lot of more-than-human resistance. For example, as Gandy's study (2019) documented the connection between the decaying graves and the reemergence of the rare type of fly.

Finally, my last sub-chapter focuses on displacement as living in capitalist ruins (Tsing, 2015) in the context of shopping.

### **3.5. Department stores: living in capitalist ruins**

I enter Karstadt. On my way up the stairs, I pass the 40 % discount on all goods. On each floor, it takes me a while to find the right escalator – half of them are closed on the way up. There's a sign about "Karstadt – saving energy together" in front of every closed elevator.

I arrive at the spacious café at the top of the building. When you come up the stairs, on your right is a hotel buffet-style restaurant area. I see a lot of 60+ people getting their breakfast with a 6+1 breakfast buffet offer – buy 6 get one free for breakfast items such as scrambled eggs. There's an elevated platform for people to sit on, I sit myself right next to the terrace (that is... closed), on one of the sitting benches around the elevated area. Even though the ceilings aren't high because of the terrace on all sides, the café feels very light even on a dark January morning. Through the window outside you can see the vegetable market at Hermannplatz, the busy area around the u8 U-bahn station, with a lot of people and traffic moving back and forth. It feels almost meditative without the background noise.

On the left side, there's the recovery area for the shopping assistants. The rest of the café is open to everyone: People sit on their own, with their laptops, most of them of retirement age. A beige leather sofa stands right next to the escalator. The wooden tables are paired, tall brown chairs, that are padded with fake fur. The coat hangers overflow with winter jackets. In the back, there's a former bar area. I remember this being closed since I first visited the café in

2017. The bar still has glasses and a drinks menu. It looks like a backdrop decoration of a TV set of a 90s telenovela.

The most prominent decoration feature are fake flowers. The restaurant area is surrounded by fake trees and palms. The elevated area has a couple of decorative room dividers with red lilies in flute-vases. My favourite is a vaulted artificial glass front in the middle of the room with 21 flower bouquets in vases.

I now enter the restaurant area: there's a queue at the only coffee machine. It's a self-service place. Another out-of-service sign in front of the coffee machine. I pay for my tea and the piece of Gugelhupf that I can't resist (the café has almost no vegan food options, not even milk) and pay 5.45 EUR to a friendly shop assistant who informs me that "mice work slowly" when the receipt rolls in an unusually slow way out of the cash desk.

The terrace is shortly opened by one of the employees at 12.00. Even though it officially opens in April for the general public, smokers are allowed in. (Field note 26.01. 2023, 10.00)

In this part of the thesis, I zoom into how the repurposing of Karstadt contributes to living in capitalist ruins. Inspired by extinction studies that plead to pay close attention to mutual ways of co-living (van Dooren, 2014), I examine how certain lifestyles get lost and how is personal space meditated for the women.

I begin with my field note, which reinforces the sense of belonging rooted in the café in Karstadt. The retired women I met in the café socialize there on a regular basis. The second wave feminist motto "personal is political" (Hanish, 1969/2006) also applies to the theories of space. It is not solely the profit and utility of the café that are at stake, but also the distinctive private ways of living and spending time that are at risk of being lost. In capitalism personal space and time is always mediated by the modes of production, yet not everyone is able or willing to engage in these activities, for example due to a limited access to work as a retired person.

The women's time spent in the Karstadt café on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor is reminiscent of Muñoz's (2009) queering of time Muñoz argues that queer time disrupts the linear progression of conventional time (33). These women often order a cup of coffee and sit in the café for several hours, undisturbed, as many have noted. It is also possible to sit there without consuming anything at all. By sitting and spending time in these largely unused spaces, the women do not engage in any "productive" activity in a capitalist



sense. When not engaged in any productive activity – such as quick consumption or working - it is difficult for some bodies to have a feeling of belonging. The time spent in this café does not fit the notions of straight time. These women actively sit here against the time. Karstadt café provides the space for belonging and comfort for my interviewees.

While the Karstadt building seems to be strongly anchored in the imagination of Hermannplatz of my interviewees, the building does not exist as a heritage landmark but as an everyday store and meeting place. The fear of loss as a meeting place was the most palpable. All of the interviewed retired women who frequented the café regularly had heard that Karstadt would be closed, and followed the news closely.

It is important to us from a social point of view that it is preserved here. If nobody comes, it will be closed. It will also be difficult for it to be preserved. And we both think that it's important for Hermannplatz that it stays open because a lot of older women can walk around here and look at things. It's not just about shopping but it's also a social place. And many older people also come here to eat if they are there more often. (Liane, 27. March 2023)

I met Liane, a 70 year old former post office employee originally from Stuttgart, when she was sitting with her friend Elke at café Karstadt on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor. These former colleagues are one of the many women of retired age that have been coming on a weekly basis to the café for decades. Taking Latour's definition of political ecology (Latour&Porter, 2004) as a cosmos of human and non-human entities, I understand the world of my interviewees as living together with other women as well as with the presence of these different goods in this space of Karstadt. Karstadt is not only a space to shop, but this commercial space also becomes a part of their personal space. As Mindy Fullilove (2005) argues, „neighbourhoods are the sum of their sounds, smells, noises, and the memories made within them.“ (Fullilove in Mount 2020,7). So displacing and rebuilding Karstadt and sanitizing the area around Hermannplatz will have a definite effect on the neighbourhood and its affective infrastructure.

As Elfriede told me, “I don't go to the department store just to have a young fashion. I also want to satisfy my daily needs” (Elfriede, 27. March 2023). As my interviewees emphasize, it is the diversity and number of people in this community that make it possible for a department store to exist. The variety of goods is what attracts my

interviewees to do their shopping there. The anchoring of the department store as a meeting point is obviously mediated by the coming together for the purpose of the place in a capitalist sense: to buy different goods. In Subchapter 3.1., I have discussed how the function of department stores in society has changed significantly. From flagships of capitalism, they have been partially repurposed by my interviewees as a meeting place. In the present day, it's the women who use it as their place of meeting. Often widowed or divorced, it makes it important for them as a social anchor point. The feeling of home and community is strongly connected to food and the feeling of community.

We met here at Karstadt. I'm left alone in this world. We talk, there are also differences of opinion, at my age you have to cultivate friendships. I'm 82 now too. I'm a bit stricken because I lost my son and my life partner (Interview with Corinne, 29. March 2023)

Karstadt café becomes a space of informal meetings and also for discussing politics. Within the political ecology of this place, the relationships made at Karstadt surpass the locality of the café and the department store.

Every day we come here for coffee. Then we talk to the people. And then they [SIGNA] say "no, we don't need this café anymore!" Sometimes when you are in the streets somebody says, "Oh hello, you're here again?" And then I say "I'm terribly sorry, but I don't know you." And they're like "No, no, you always sit at Karstadt with the women!" (Interview with Hanna, 30. March 2023)

According to my interviewees, Berlin does not offer many other many meeting places for retired people. With their age, loss of life partners, and diminished income and mobility, Karstadt and the café become crucial points in their social life. All of them suggest that the café is a key part of their daily routine. As the café will close by the end of 2023, a significant part of these routines will be lost. I identified many aspects of the political ecology that connects Karstadt with the life of these women. These I define as 1) classical function of a department store - shopping offline in one place, a department store that fosters the feeling of home as well as luxury 2) presence in a public space with age and 3) a place of community and solidarity also with the employees, 4) nostalgia - memories that support the life of these women. By tracing these arguments, I focus on the space as a part of these relationships.

Vera: If you are looking for something special, special fruit or something to cook with or something special, then you get it downstairs at Karstadt

Meike: They have an offer for foreign goods. Spain, France, you won't find that at the vegetable market, and there are things in general that you only find at Karstadt (exchange between Vera and Meike, 3. April 2023).

I see the department store as a pioneer of late capitalism that helped foster an imagination that connects consumption with leisure. As mentioned in my methodological chapter, the generation of my interviewees, which were predominantly women born in the late 1930s – 1950s, department stores were firmly integrated into their daily trajectories, long before they become retired. My interviewees do not enjoy shopping online. Elke described it to me in the following way: “I like when I can try it on directly or when I see it. And I think it will stay that way “(Interview Elke, 22. March 2023). With the rising opportunities to shop online, department stores and other shops that provide an embodied shopping experience diminish.

If I want to do something nice for my daughter, then we come to Karstadt to have a nice mother-daughter day, we've always found great things here, from inexpensive to upscale. I don't buy online. If I can't find anything here, I tell my daughter to take a look, online you can find more offers. But I support Karstadt and say if we don't support the trade, where can you go to, feel, touch, smell the goods? I tell my daughter, what do you smell on a bag, I say the leather stinks, it's badly fermented. Then my daughter says I've never experienced shopping like that, then I say I have, that is my life experience, I've had it before. And so I like to convey "go and buy", make more of a nice experience day outside, and not always this online (Elfriede, 21. March 2023)

As Elfriede told me, shopping in a department store is not only connected to the act of shopping, it becomes a family activity, an experience of the celebrated mother-daughter day. For those who do not have a family for different reasons - my interviewees were often widowed, divorced or their children lived in other places - Karstadt provides an everyday community. For my interviewees, shopping becomes a tactile experience, a walking experience between shopping, touching the goods, as well as an embodied experience. For example, when the Karstadt at Hermannplatz first

opened in 1929, the fresh food was upstairs so people could buy other things on the way upstairs. As my opening vignette shows, the walk between these stores and the layout makes people stay longer. The way these women shop is also something that creates a generational difference between them. They use their senses to choose the products rather than choose them online as their younger family members would.

The experience of just a simple existence and shopping in an undisturbed way seems to be valuable to the people I interviewed. With age, their “right to the city” (Fenster, 2005) diminishes. Doing their shopping at Karstadt while at the same time using the space as a meeting point becomes one of the few possibilities for my interviewees with the limited mobility caused by ageing. Elfriede told me: “I’m becoming more and more limited, but with age one is more limited with physicality, not with the head, I try to buy here because it's comfortable for me” (Elfriede, 24. March 2023). Elfriede is one of the premium clients of Karstadt (meaning she received a bonus card for her frequent shopping) and grew up in the neighbourhood. As she and the other participants that I met in the café, such as Gertrude, emphasize how their city space as well as personal space diminish.

The interviewed women view themselves as adopters of the shopping model as well as the saviours of the department stores. The affective qualities I connect with department stores and their marketing are the feeling of *Heimweh* (homesickness) as well as the *Fernweh* (far-sickness). Historically, In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is likely that department stores changed the ways of shopping in a similar way as online shopping does today. It was an innovation to have so many stores in one. The convenience principle is as important to selling goods as the building layout. Anne McClintock (1995) demonstrates how the “invention” of advertising and imperial capitalism initiated the commodification and global mass production of common objects such as soap. During the Victorian Era, due to the capitalist transformation, the consumption of exotic fruits became increasingly popular in the West, popularized by magazines such as *Vogue*. Aggressive advertising has been a part of the success strategy of Karstadt, and other department stores use it as a way of attracting desirable audiences. If we look at the advertising from the 1920 and -1930s, we see a (white) woman wearing a fur coat (Lenz, 1995). This sharply contrasts with the former image of Neukölln as a working class neighbourhood. With their connection with the U-Bahn, the new transport establishes a potential for middle class customers from different neighborhood, as well as outsourcing the area of shopping to the outskirts. Karstadt catered to the needs of

those doing ordinary shopping and luxury shopping, and contributed to changing the outline of the neighbourhood towards a more middle class audience. The imprint of Karstadt into the map of the city has been significant – including its accessibility for the working class people as well as people from different boroughs.

With their varied offers and connection of many shops under one roof, department stores have expanded their potential clientele to different class backgrounds. Even today, visitors have a connection with going to Karstadt to get something “special”. At the same time, for some, Karstadt and its goods can – then and now - represent the feeling of home.

When I moved here (from Southern Germany), I was told I can get Maultaschen [note: Swabian ravioli-type pasta dish] dough here in the grocery department. I couldn't find any Maultaschen dough anywhere else in Berlin. I was able to make Maultaschen a few times a year. And then of course I looked at the department store. Now I'm no longer able to buy Maultaschen dough here. They stopped selling it (Liane, 27. March 2023)

This community around shopping and consumption is fostered with the other women, as well as the Karstadt employees. The employees and customers often share solidarity. I have shown in my methodology chapter, I was “helped” on behalf of the employees and customers

If you tried something on, you could wave to every saleswoman or ask if she would come with you. Or that she gives you a recommendation. Whether it suits me, whether it doesn't... Sometimes you need encouragement from a saleswoman, but there isn't one any more. And Karstadt used to have a lot of staff and that has been thinned out. (Meike, 3. April 2023)

Today a different problem arises, the older generation that uses department stores is likely not to buy goods online. Therefore they are dependent on the shopping possibilities in their neighbourhood. As the interview participants told me, they will buy “a small thing here and there” (Elke, 27. March 2023), the department store on prime real estate location is no longer profitable when the same amount of goods can be sold online. Elke described to me that she knows how to shop online but she does not enjoy it. Other interviewees told me that receiving advice from the employees is what

motivates them to shop in the department store. Shopping online also requires knowledge of technology that some of these women do not have. The act of shopping within a department store, with its diverse range of possibilities for trying and experiencing various goods, signifies an embodied experience for the participants involved.

With shopping happening outside of department stores, the whole political ecology stays fragile, and creates the feeling of living in capitalist ruins (Tsing, 2015) inside of the department store. Even though the women find belonging, the department store as they knew it does not exist anymore. As my field note shows, it becomes increasingly difficult to even find a working escalator. The capitalist ruins symbolize the aftermath and visible consequences of capitalist ventures that have either failed, become obsolete, or been abandoned for various reasons. The women describe this feeling of ruins in almost every interview.

The coffee machine won't even be repaired. The shop assistant told me that there is nobody to repair the coffee machines – too expensive or there are no workers. There's a lot going to waste (Elfriede, 21. March 2023)

Capitalist ruins often carry historical, cultural, and symbolic significance. Beside community and practical reasons, the interviewed women connect this way of living with their younger years and a certain nostalgia. Elfriede described how Berlin used to have many nice cafes. I think this might be the reason why these women still go to Karstadt despite the declining quality.

Karstadt employees felt these changes too. While in 2020, I did not have a problem finding a shopping assistant willing to talk, in the period between 2022 and 2023 none of them agreed to an interview. Anytime I approached them, they dismissed me with “I don't know about politics” or pointing at being too busy. Some of my interviewees trace the lack of goods and people online to Covid. As various statistics show, Covid has been a major influence on the rise of e-commerce ( see Inoue & Todo, 2023).

Getrude told me: “It [Karstadt] has become emptier. Because of Corona, many people order and no longer buy. The departments are sometimes very empty.” (Getrude, 20. March 2023). Getrude is one of the women who come to the café in Karstadt every day. It is essential to recognize that a lot of geopolitical circumstances have been

affecting the economic development of the department store chain, and contributed to the ripple effect: as discussed in the previous chapter about the time in the 1930s. In present day, as a lot of businesses went bankrupt due to pandemic measurements. The 2020 pandemic helped to conceal the economic machinations of SIGNA.

In the section 3.5. I have observed the trajectories of experience of belonging and homeliness as well as luxury a group of retired women connects with the Karstadt at Hermannplatz. I have noted that by closing the Karstadt café, the personal spatiotemporal relations will be lost for these people, as well as their ways of shopping will be lost. I have observed that the state of Karstadt has been in decline for a long time, and argued that a department store can be analyzed as capitalist ruins.

### **3.6. Conclusion**

In this chapter I have asked what type of losses the renovation project causes for the community around Hermannplatz. I have identified various narratives and modes of belonging, that can help us regard Karstadt and Hermannplatz as a storied place (van Dooren & Rose, 2014) by having an appreciation to the different ways of being and usage of this space.

Additionally, I have outlined the current scandal around the Karstadt owner SIGNA's reconstruction of Karstadt at Hermannplatz as well as the historical significance of this building for the neighborhood. Employing affective reading, I have traced the developer's argumentation from monumentality towards green values, and argued that this reconstruction happens under colonialist, racist and heteronormative premises. I posit that this reconstruction is significant of the increasingly common hybridity (Blessing, 2012) of contemporary global real estate investment, where the personal and public interest collide.

In my discussion of aspects of gentrification in Neukölln, I have posited that the danger of ecologically motivated gentrification and its connection with critical race theories, such as brown commons (Muñoz 2020) against the arguments of diversity and accessibility. Additionally I have argued for the importance of artists and activists in actively shaping these urban processes. My research has shown that their presence can both halt as well as enhance gentrification.

Through fieldwork at café Karstadt, I have considered the political ecology of the café on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor, and shown how belonging is negotiated in this space and time. I have proposed that the women's nostalgia, diminished mobility and learnt ways of

participating in (and against) a capitalist economy makes these women early adopters and saviors of the department store model. Through different circumstances, the case of this department store can be interpreted as a capitalist ruin (Tsing, 2015).

With Chapter 3, I have laid out the entanglements of nature-cultures, in which capitalism, technology, historical, cultural and natural processes cannot be extricated in a case of a gentrifying neighborhood. In Chapter 4, I pay closer attention to the material and more-than-human aspects of this gentrification case.



## CHAPTER 4

### COHABITATION AND DISPLACEMENT IN NATURECULTURES: MORE-THAN-HUMAN AGENCY

#### **4.1. Introduction**

Displacement extends beyond human experiences. It happens not only in an affective level as a question of values or aspirations, it also encompasses the displacement of sounds, materials, infrastructures and non-human animals. To exemplify, the displacement of the post-war debris has helped to build different areas around Berlin, such as Hasenheide Park in the vicinity of Karstadt.

In this chapter, I address the question of agency of materials in displacement and gentrification. Chapter 4 focuses on the more-than-human aspects of cohabitation, cement, food and dirt and infrastructure. Taking the example of cement, I analyze how this building material became agential in the process of building, destruction, and the current rebuilding plan. I argue that, while cement did not determine these shifts, attention to its materiality compels us to consider what the material contributes to the historical processes driving urban changes. Firstly, I will examine how the terrace of Karstadt was imagined in naturecultures (Haraway, 2003). Subsequently I look into the agency of cement. I will analyze infrastructural advancements and follow with a discussion of gardens and waste, food and dirt.

I enclose a field note about the parking lot that should enhance the terrace on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor, which I will be returning towards throughout the chapter.

I set out to sit at the rooftop Karstadt café on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor at 10.00, right after they have opened. The opening hours seem to be shortening gradually, so I don't want to risk coming before 9. Entering the building from Urbanstrasse, I pass via the new Karstadt biking lane in the parking lot that offers a connection between Urbanstrasse and Hasenheide and lets the pedestrians and bikers avoid passing through the busy Hermannplatz.

There's a wooden sign on both sides of the parking lot advertising the new café Karstadt: the Greek Café Pala. The stylish new café with jungle plants behind the glass door stays closed, even though the neon lights try to pull people in at any time of the day or night. I have never seen it open.

When I lock my bike, I notice there are disability signs on the parking spot and I contemplate if I should leave the bike there. I realize they are old signs, the (now partially defunct) parking lot didn't get rid of the old marks.

The urban gardens, the mini-gardens in huge flower pots in the backlot, don't seem to be tended by anyone. Maybe in the summer? There are also signs for Karuna, the homeless NGO that Karstadt cooperates with on the reconstruction project.<sup>19</sup> I identify some of these plants –raspberry, mint, and peas. (Field Note, January 23.1.2023)

#### **4.2. Echoes of the past: The Karstadt terrace in naturecultures**

When studying the historical sources about Karstadt in the 1920s, I was struck by many material similarities to the current case. I argue that to clearly understand the role of Karstadt and the proposals for its rebuilding in the current gentrification scandal, that repurposes the building with an ecological agenda, it is important to locate it on the axis of Haraway's naturecultures (2003).

The building of Karstadt in 1920 proposes a building of a symbol with effusive boundaries between nature-culture- consumerism within Berlin's urban landscape. As I have introduced in the literary overview, "naturecultures" (Haraway, 2003) is a critical theoretical concept that disputes the divisibility of nature and culture. In this subchapter, I aim to lay out the entanglements of the concepts of nature and culture that intersect in the building of Karstadt. I argue that these have historically contributed to the special status of Karstadt as "the most striking building in Berlin" (Lenz, 1995).

The opening ceremony was particularly important in establishing Karstadt for shopping (Uebel, 2000). The most defining feature of the building was the world city restaurant and the rooftop garden. In Neukölln, there were previously no imposing buildings and Berlin had no exclusive rooftop terrace for common audience (Uebel, 2000). Visitors could "enjoy a breathtaking view of Berlin surrounded by a vibrant array of flowers while being serenaded by top-notch music bands" (Lenz, 1995, 33). In case of bad weather, the roof garden provided a covered area with a spacious restaurant for guests to relax. A high-speed elevator allowed direct access to the roof garden, which remained open even after regular business hours (Lenz 1995, 22-23). The

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<sup>19</sup> They have run some promotional activities in 2020 together, and they have made a billboard advertising their services.

Karstadt terrace was imagined as a prototype of a new city. A newspaper account from 1920 describes the terrace in the following way.

You sit there between low-lying and raised beds of geraniums, pelargoniums, and monthly changing floral bouquets of the season. If you look beyond this wonderful sea of flowers, Berlin is spread out there. On a clear day you could look far out (...), but in front of you was the “huge panorama of the cosmopolitan city with its landmarks: its churches, its town hall tower, its cathedral and the Radio channel. (Newspaper account from 1920s, Uebel, 2000)



Image 6 : features of the urban garden in the parking lot. Image by author Image 7: Terrace garden in 1930s. Source: Rudolph Karstadt AG

The opening ceremony was particularly important in establishing Karstadt for shopping (Lenz, 1995). The most defining feature of the building was the world city restaurant and the rooftop garden. In Neukölln, there were previously no imposing buildings and Berlin had no exclusive rooftop terrace for common audience (Lenz, 1995). Visitors could “enjoy a breathtaking view of Berlin surrounded by a vibrant array of flowers while being serenaded by top-notch music bands” (Lenz, 1995, 33). In case of bad weather, the roof garden provided a covered area with a spacious restaurant for guests to relax. A high-speed elevator allowed direct access to the roof garden, which remained open even after regular business hours (Lenz 1995, 22-23). The Karstadt terrace was imagined as a prototype of a new city. A newspaper account from 1920 describes the terrace in the following way.

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The historical newspaper wrote: “The human urge for light, air and sun is enormous. And so he [sic] flees to the top of the skyscraper mountains, to the roofs of the city, where he can relax, where there is still light, air and sun” (Lenz, 1995, 50).<sup>20</sup> The way the newspaper promoted Karstadt seemed to suggest that there was no sun for other houses. As established in the previous chapter, Neukölln was a working class neighborhood with a vast farming area (Stanic, 1985). There had been a lot of opportunities to spend time – for free - in green areas. The reason Karstadt and its connection to nature were advertised was to propose a new prototype for modern living and was mediated by capitalist consumption.

Karstadt catered towards the idea that people would enjoy the nature on the terrace while at the same time being in the middle of the cultural city. Living in the Weimar Republic was so progressive that it allowed for both. Thinking about the leisure time on the terrace in the late 1920s, I am reminded of *Metropolis* (1927). Fritz Lang’s (1927) film, a popular science fiction film from this time, depicts a futuristic city where the stark division between the wealthy ruling class and the oppressed working class is prominently showcased. The film - set in a Berlin-like metropole – evokes technocratic ideas that at the same time elevate “nature” in the sense of beauty and innocence. The protagonists play in the garden high above the city. Built on these technological structures, the idea cultivated is nature as something pure and innocent, that sits on top of a building and only the ruling class can access it.

The terrace in 1929 was designed for customers and employees to spend time and money. From the beginning there seemed to be a division between the solvent and less solvent audiences: at the time of its opening, Karstadt was something that was available for a wide audience. The younger audience from the neighborhood saved the entrance fee by standing tightly packed in front of the restaurant hall. The porosity of

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<sup>20</sup> A similar sentiment is echoed by an interview almost 90 later, when talking to Vera (“The soul can dangle when the sun goes down”, Vera, Interview 3.April 2023).

the glass wall allowed people to experience it (Lenz, 1995, 277). As Lothar Uebel (2000) describes, the roof garden was always busy (unlike today, when the terrace is mostly empty due to its limited opening hours). With the exception of one woman who described the terrace as “too windy”, my interviewees still appreciated the terrace today, as a place to relax, chat and watch the sunset, a daily luxury. At the same time, Karstadt functions as a shield for the customers from the natural element - the weather. Due to the direct connection with the subway, Liane told me that for her Karstadt is accessible without “having to go through the snow and rain, through bad weather” (Liane, 27. March 2023).

In the new proposition by SIGNA, the “outside” (Hermannplatz) and “inside” (Karstadt) become more connected, as described in Chapter 3. As discussed earlier, the aim of SIGNA is to make the place greener and more interesting for the community. For some of the interviewees, enhancing the aspect of nature is not persuasive because they do not connect nature with the city. When she was discussing the proposition, Liane was questioning the necessity of nature in the city.

The question is what is nature? Nature isn't a few trees standing around. Nature is untouched. And you really don't have that in the city. I think it's nice to sit outside in the fresh air, then the birds are there, it's just the city, but we moved to the city because we wanted to live in the city. Otherwise you would have to move to Brandenburg and there would be more nature (Liane, Interview 27. March 2023)

In Liane's imagination, nature exists only outside the city, and even constitutes an antithesis of the city. The terrace with its sunny deck and different plants – while at the same time connected with the U-bahn - offers a good alternative to the dull countryside nature in Brandenburg (or further parts of Neukölln). The terrace is closer to nature, but it represents only an almost nature, a tamed one, a civilized one. While other interviewees emphasized what they termed nature in Berlin's city presence, Liane did not seem to be interested in the greening of the area around Hermannplatz, the way it was proposed by SIGNA. The current - somewhat sad version of the rooftop terrace - cannot be compared with the one in 1920s, that was tended by several professional gardeners (Uebel, 2000).

Naturecultures is what Haraway defines as the entanglement of nature-culture in capitalism, which cannot be disentangled. The connection between nature and culture of the place on the terrace have been apparent from the opening of Karstadt: in the concerts taking place on the terrace. In the 1920s and 1930s, the concerts, taking place twice every afternoon, alone made the place popular. According to the historical sources (Lenz, 1995, Uebel, 2000), the well-known bands that made guest appearances in Berlin played there.

As Lenz (1995) documents, in 1939 Karstadt - despite downsizing everything else and not making a profit - started a house orchestra. The band of Otto Kernbach composed a jubilee march in 1939 ten years after the opening, and the “Foxtrott: Everything a woman needs, everything a man desires, is always there at Karstadt, so everything goes to RK (Rudolph Karstadt)”. While women have needs, men have desires. A lot of women have needed Karstadt. They need it as a working space, and for class mobility. The new Henriette and Hermann of the 2020 seem to be connecting exactly to this type of aspirational song.

Karstadt has been a cultured institution within a working-class neighbourhood in West Berlin. Based on the participants’ observations, this homeliness was indicated by the Christmas concerts, the ‘5 o’clock tea’, the adjectives describing the department store as “my” Karstadt. In 1987 Karstadt made an exhibition where they constructed a new model of the Karstadt from the 1920s. This model can still be seen at Karstadt on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor today. By organizing events such as the exhibition Kiezzgestein in 2019, SIGNA tries to put Karstadt on the map as a cultural institution. Referring to the 1970s, Elfriede remarked on a similar imagination of Karstadt:

The life was in full swing in here. After the renovation, the level increased, there was a 5 o'clock tea, you felt at home there, but many innovations were not accepted here by the clientele. After reunification they changed everything. There was no more Christmas piano playing, no more 5 o'clock tea. Karstadt wanted to attract a younger clientele. (Elfriede, 27. March 2023).

This continues a story of loss and decline from Chapter 3, for some, and makes it easy for SIGNA to rebuild a new place. For some of my interviewees, Hermannplatz and Karstadt seem to be right as they are, a combination of nature-cultures. Closing with the exchange between Meike and Vera, I demonstrate a different attitude towards the imagination of nature and culture at Hermannplatz.

Vera: Culture is quite a lot here. The House of Cultures is here. The brewery is, there are also many cafes. Then there's the SchwuZ. [a club] for people with different sexualities. That's great.

Meike: And we also have Karl-Marx-Strasse. Cinema, theater, puppet theater

Vera: Gallery is there

Meike: And there's enough culture in Neukölln. Right on Hermannplatz.

Vera: And nature, we have the Hasenheide here or then the canal...

(interview Meike, Vera, 3. April 2023)

Vera and Meike show, in their almost naïve proclamation about the area around Hermannplatz, that they regard this part of Neukölln as an ideal naturecultural zone. The cultural spots that they mention - such as the puppet theatre, the House of Culture Oyoun – are non-profit community run projects in former industrial zones. The aforementioned Global Village, SchwuZ as well as KINDL Gallery are all located in the area of the brewery (which Vera mentions). By supporting the reconstruction plan in its current form by SIGNA and sanitizing Hermannplatz, also these projects in the vicinity of Hermannplatz can be endangered by the risk of gentrification. If SIGNA would really be inspired by the community, they could have provided space for use for art projects as well as turn the whole parking lot and rooftop into a community garden.

In this subchapter I have demonstrated how the imaginations of Karstadt in nature-cultures in 1920s have repercussions in the present, and how they influence the arguments of monumental /green values, driving the current gentrification. This imagination has been enabled by the materiality of cement as well as other infrastructures. In the subsequent subchapter I delve further into the material aspects of the building.

#### **4.3. The materiality of cement and other infrastructures**

After SIGNA received the initial criticism from activists and the media (Initiative Hermannplatz, July 2019) as discussed in Chapter 3, they decided to rebuild the building in a more sustainable way. When I started to think about the Karstadt case, I was struck by the question: How does the building material and its properties contribute to its legacy? In this subchapter, I am interested in how the materiality of building material, as well as infrastructure, supports displacement as well as belonging.

Work by postcolonial feminist geographers such as Truelove (2019) uses an embodied urban political ecology approach to foreground the situated and affective ways in which the materiality of infrastructures, such as cement and glass, produce social difference along intersectional lines. I am interested in the building materials in connection with the sociomaterial reality they create.

#### **4.3.1. Cement**

With their straight lines, clean surfaces, and sleek edges, the cemented building have changed the outlines of cities, and distanced themselves from rural areas. In the 1920s, Karstadt was built with new industrial, “modern” materials, like cement, concrete, and steel, unlike the Neukölln village-type houses that dominated the area in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Stanic, 1985). The power of the solid landmark of 1929 Karstadt was ingrained quite firmly into the imagination. There is a historical photo of children making a sandpit castle version of Karstadt at Hertzbergplatz (Stanic, 1985). In the current promotion campaign, Karstadt has used three local Lego artists to build a large Karstadt building in its original form out of LEGO bricks on the first floor of the Karstadt building (Schilp, 2021). In March 2023, I discovered a Lego set of the original architectonic model of Karstadt that can be bought for 29 EUR and constructed at home. These model copies of the original construction reproduce the straight lines of cement, limestone and other materials, that have enabled the building to be constructed in this imposing way.

Rudolf Lenz (1995) called Karstadt an “Empire built on sand”. Berlin, which is actually a swamp, did not provide a good foundation for the building. Lenz notes that “such a large building had to have deep foundations in the Brandenburg sands of Berlin. The building rested on a huge concrete slab two stories below street level” (Lenz, 1995, 106-107).

Cement is a dull greyish powder produced by heating limestone, clay, and silica-rich minerals at high temperatures in large cement kilns, often located near limestone mines far from construction sites<sup>21</sup>. Cement is a material that combines the solidity of stone but is malleable and flexible. During construction, wet cement is extremely plastic and mobile. It can flow into a mould of any shape or size and embody any kind of aspiration or desire; in the 1920s this was biggest department store in Europe, with its expressionist-style building. Once cement dries, it becomes solid and rigid. It fixes

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<sup>21</sup> Once manufactured, the powder is packed and transported to distributors and dealers nationwide.



ways of living in set patterns that are difficult to change unless you completely breakdown and rebuild cement walls, which is an expensive and time-consuming procedure.

Cement has a good claim to being a crucial element of the Anthropocene, alongside plastics and fertilizers, and metals (Lilja, 2021). According to Eli Elinoff (2019), cement-driven earthworks have accelerated fossil fuel extraction and enabled widespread automobile use, leading to various environmental changes. Urban construction, powered by cement, has transformed weather patterns, intensifying heat. With cement, humans possess the ability to shape the Earth's processes at a remarkable speed. While cement itself did not single-handedly drive these changes, examining its significance prompts us to consider its impact on the historical processes that have shaped environmental transformations, such as expanding city areas from rural areas.

Cement played a crucial role in the development of nationalist architectural styles during the early 20th century (Menon, 2023), contributing to the rapid expansion of hardened environments over the past century. Cement's superior structural strength as compared to traditional materials, like mud, and wood, was harnessed to construct large buildings and infrastructures, like railways, ports, warehouses, and barracks. For its capacity, cement was sometimes called the "infrastructure's infrastructure" (Menon, 2023). Cement became the cheap and flexible basis of modernity's logistics, aesthetics, and speed.

According to Menon (2023), historical processes have discursively constructed cement's association with ideas of progress, modernity, and development in the minds of Indian citizens, and these values of modernity are further disseminated and adopted in other locations, including the Global South. As Menon (2023) shows in his study about the transformation from mud houses to cement houses in India, cement both upholds and disrupts the gendered division of labour (e.g. it is gendered who builds the house (men), who keeps it clean (women). While cement houses bring more prestige, they also means more cleaning work for women. This highlights the "paradoxical materiality" (Harvey 2017) of these infrastructural interventions

In a similar vein, Myers (2019), with her analysis of the Singapore's Gardens at the Bay, proposes large building projects represent the modern aspirational buildings that, in the end, propose these colonialist ideas and erase local architecture. While I am reluctant to compare the urbanity in the Global South and in Berlin, in terms

of aspirations, building Karstadt from cement signals the transformation from a rural and crafts area of the urban Rixdorf to large buildings of a modern city Berlin.

The original Karstadt building was built with ferroconcrete (reinforced concrete), cement and shell limestone. The material was sourced from different places, meaning that it also supported the extraction in the region, such as the Franconian shell limestone, Germany's finest natural stone. As my ecofeminist history introduction has shown, the questions about sourcing materials have been a feminist concern since the 1980s. The *Wirtschaftswunder* that I have mentioned in Chapter 3.1. was enabled by a lot of industrial zones in Germany. Lime extraction has likely been occurring since ancient times, but large-scale quarrying began in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Limestone, a sedimentary rock mainly composed of calcium carbonate in the form of calcite, serves as the primary ingredient for concrete. It is worth noting that processed limestone is commonly found in plastic products, another defining feature of this era. The connections between design and extractivism are often obscured. (Lilja, 2021). The idea of the Karstadt building being excluded from nature does not hold ground in the sense of new-materialist theories. The new materials being more "natural" and sustainable, as SIGNA proposes, seems to be ridiculous, as there are no building materials which are not cultural products. In the 1920s, cement had been the main building element. Some scholars have called cement the "materiality of urbanization". The basis of the building will still be cement, that will be reused up to 70 % (SIGNA, 9. Juni 2020).

Projects such as Karstadt, both in the building and rebuilding, require vast amounts of cement, making it the world's most used material after water. Cement production has been estimated to cause of 5-7% of the worldwide carbon imprint. Cement also keeps the promise of social prestige. The presence of Karstadt has meant new jobs in the neighbourhood, the materiality has made it possible. As Lenz (1995) observes, more than 30 Berlin companies participated in the production. The massive construction of exceptional strength was created and meant that 420 have worked here to build Karstadt within 15 months. When Karstadt was built, a lot of workers from the area were given a job at the construction site. Some of the companies involved from Berlin still exist today and continued their collaboration in 2000 (Lenz, 1995).

While back then, Karstadt was a local employer, this time SIGNA has been only working with famous international companies such as David Chipperfield. As Die Linke criticizes (2023), SIGNA's architectural proposal does not take into account the

existing work of the former reconstruction. As Myers (2019) notes about the construction of the Singapore's Gardens at the Bay, these megalomaniac architectural constructions are often carried by migrant workers with low pay, who will be further displaced out of the cities. While I do not want to compare working conditions of the former reconstructions, I hope that SIGNA's project – if it finally happens - will at least bring fairly paid wages and working conditions also for the workers beside the well-known design studios.

In the 2020s, SIGNA proposed to use wood to offset the impact of cement. The current question is also how much of the material will be reused and what are the connections between planting trees and chopping trees for wood. Wood is not always the most sustainable source. The problems with wood cutting are deforestation, building monocultures in the forest. Fast deforestations can also lead to wildfires. For a truly sustainable building, there must be a transparent policy about sourcing, which has currently not been presented.

Contrasting the monumentality of Karstadt with the vegetable stands of the vegetable sellers at Hermannplatz, a sturdy cement construction is at an advantage over these non-permanent structures that can be quickly assembled and disassembled. The materiality of durable materials such as cement enables everyday dimensions of differences and foregrounds the need to study embodied and affective components of infrastructures. These materials -backed by global investment - play a vital role in mediating experiences of poverty, danger of illnesses and inequality for marginalized groups as well as individuals.

#### **4.3.2. Echoes of the past: innovative infrastructures**

Karstadt's infrastructure has not only been enabled by cement, but also by other advancements. I regard more-than-human belonging and displacement with the help of the concept of trans-corporeality (Alaimo, 2016) to discuss the further enmeshments on the axis of bodily-material infrastructures.

The department store was unique in many aspects, such as with its cooling and heating system. Despite the mentally and physically demanding work, employment in a department store meant social advancement for many research participants. Working in the modern, light-flooded rooms and dealing with a wide variety of customers contributed to the attractiveness. Working at Karstadt offered a lot of opportunities for their career development.

As Uebel (2000) documents, when it came to selling goods, Karstadt presented a new refrigeration system in 1929, which was better for the food than for the shop assistants who were exposed to the constant cold air from the cooling setup. “The shopping assistants were complaining about the stress. Especially in the food department, they suffered a lot of ailments: colds, sciatica, frost on hands and feet due to the constant cool air and humid air.” (Uebel, 2000, 277). The working stress had not only been induced by the demanding employer, but also influenced by the non-human agents, such as the refrigerating system that had been installed as a symbol of modernity and technological advancement.

It also meant that the shopping assistants had to endure cold, which resulted in a lot of illnesses: This example demonstrates how infrastructural materiality interacts with bodies in intimate ways. Stacy Alaimo (2018) uses the concept of trans-corporeality to describe the enmeshment of the body with the environment. With the concept of “trans-corporeality” Stacy Alaimo (2018) posits that humans and non-humans are intertwined with a dynamic material world and mutually enhance each other. The delineation between the human and the environment becomes indistinct as significant material exchanges traverse the contours of the human form. As Alaimo concludes, mapping those interchanges across all species and at all scales is the prelude to trans-corporeal ethics and politics (436). Trans-corporeality is negotiated and mediated through various modes of human and non-human existence, and capitalist, colonialist, patriarchal modes of being.

As the previous subchapter discussed, the effects of these infrastructures are gendered and mediated by class. According to Lothar Uebel (2000)’s statistics, 75% of employees were women. The profession of salesperson is also open to the lower classes of the population due to relatively low initial qualifications. On closer examination, they also reveal precarity. On the one hand, Karstadt has been imagined as a good employer with fair working conditions. On the other hand, whenever the socio-economic situation changed, the employees were dismissed. Karstadt deemed it important for there to be a ‘Karstadt spirit’ of solidarity between employees, customers and the employer, and they provided benefits such as a sports club. The division between the people who could use Karstadt to buy goods and spend their time there has been huge. There has also been also a division between the women who worked in different departments.

Due to the direct and constant exposure to the cold air, the shopping assistants got ill. The customers profit from having fresh ingredients and their bodies did not react

to the cold as they don't experience the cold air for a prolonged period of time. The employer benefits from having both an innovation system (marketing point) as well as selling fresh products that can be stored longer. Within the bodies of the shopping assistants, the sociomaterial conditions intersect on an emotional, affective (sense of pride) and physical level (exhaustion, illness). One employee's testimony records her experience of "awakening at 4 am, accompanied by coughing" (Uebel, 2000), which subsequently led to her displacement to another position outside of Karstadt. The bodies are sites where the material difference between the employees, employers and customers become apparent.

### **4.3.3. Gardens on wastelands**

I am further inspired by Natasha Myers' (2019) conceptions of plants and gardens that offer different modes of resistance for understanding my comparison between the "concrete" urban garden at the parking lot next to Karstadt (as mentioned in the fieldnote) and the terrace at the Karstadt café, that has been designed as a rooftop garden since Karstadt was first built. To illustrate the current reconstructions made by SIGNA, I enclose my description of Café Pala in the parking lot.

The "plant café" is a container structure with a glass window and neon lighting, built in a DIY aesthetics. Very haphazard type of furniture where every table and armchair is different, most of the places offer simple wooden banks, that are uncomfortable to sit on. You can't lean on the seating. The room is decorated with a large Persian carpet. Eclectic but commonplace. The café is small, I estimate around 30 square metres, much smaller than the Karstadt café upstairs. The café upstairs has artificial plants that are much smaller, compared to the plant café which looks like a pavilion in a botanical garden.

Plants are everywhere, some of the plants are stacked on bricks, different kinds such as the modest -looking but very pricy variegated monstera. There's a DJ table with expensive equipment leaning on the wall. There're seating to be put on the floor. Flower pots, decorations. A lot of plastic watering cans. You can look out but only to the parking lot which is guarded/hidden by the plants. (Field note Café Pala Monday 3.4. 2023)

In her essay "From Edenic Apocalypse to Gardens Again" Myers (2019)' aim is to understand the different relationships between plants and humans in the city and the

distinctive forms of gardens. In the new SIGNA proposition, the urban garden is built over concrete. Myers observes the dissonance between two gardens - the posh, luscious, heavily architected Gardens at the Bay and the spontaneous counter-garden projects by the artist Leo Weinberg. One garden displays the capital, “sustainability aesthetic of the jour” and needs to be tended and watered while the other thrives against the exposure to elements. According to Myers, gardens are usually seen as spaces for reflection and relaxation, yet gardens such as the Greenhouse Gardens at the Bay in Singapore might “do no such thing, they’re anxiety-provoking and remind us of the forces of late capitalism” (2019, 117). Cultivating weeds and wastelands juxtaposes the high botanical garden. She uses the method of “juxtaposition” to set in motion new meanings between cultivating weeds and wastelands versus cultivating a high-end botanical garden.

In the vein of Myers’ (2019) remark about cities’ wall gardens being built over concrete, this also happens with the Karstadt urban garden planned to be built. On a once rural area (or rurban – rural-urban), the greenery at Hermannplatz is built over and on top of the concrete, adding a new layer of green. SIGNA does not displace the cement and make new gardens, but already places the garden on the cemented area. The question is: How can sustainable gardening be possible in an area that is so starkly built over?

The other question I would often ask is: What is going to happen with the waste and unused material of Karstadt in the 2020s? Where will the waste go? Post-WW2 Berlin was an intense time of cleaning waste and debris. The rubble of the original Karstadt significantly influenced the shape of the city. After WW2, only a small part of the original construction of Karstadt was kept in place. Making this part of the wall protected under the city decree (*Denkmalschutz*) meant a basis for rebuilding Karstadt in the subsequent decades. At the same time, it made it possible that Karstadt did not disappear. It has been estimated that it took about 15 months to clean all the rubble after the bombing of Karstadt (Uebel, 2000). Mira Hird (2013) sees waste approaches as places of forgetting: we get rid of objects or their parts that no longer serve us. The waste disintegration into land is hidden away from our senses, which to Hird presents a “material enactment of forgetting” (Hird, 2013, p. 106). As Hird notes, this forgetting is not without consequences: the waste does not really dissolve or go away, its memory still imprints itself into the planet: its layers covering the surface. The caused pollution process serves as a memory of the waste. As Hird (2013) documents, the Western

approach of forgetting forgoes the responsibility for the environmental misdeeds caused by past generations.

As established earlier, the effect of infrastructure and materiality is vastly gendered. In Germany, after the war, the so-called rubble women (*“Trümmerfrauen”*) collected the waste of the destroyed city. These women were collecting the outcomes of the war, while building the city back. The reconstruction of the country was bestowed upon women as their work. At the same time, it upheld gendered stereotypes about caring and innocent women, and created this mythos of the rubble women (Trüber, 2014).

Parks like Hasenheide, located opposite to Karstadt, as Gandy’s film *Natura Urbana* (2017) shows, have been rebuilt from the ruins of buildings that were bombed out during the war. The new proposal from SIGNA does not provide any solution for the waste problems. Even if the new materials might be sustainable, there is no strategy for waste. Even if the materials would be at least partially re-used, as per their cooperation with the Danish studio Lendager, rebuilding is not sustainable. SIGNA proposes strategies such as urban mining. Concepts like these contribute to viewing cities as resources.

Perhaps a more radical proposal would be to leave the building as it is, following its own decay, as happened with other constructions in the city, as evidence of the past and a visual remark of the capitalist ruins (such as the park Südgelände or Tempelhoferfeld). This way, Karstadt would not have to invest in dubious urban gardens, as neophytical plants would find their way into the cement. The community-based management of parts of the building could bring positive change and artistic engagements. In the vein of Hird’s imaginations, it could mean direct living with the plants and proposals of the past. This “responsively attentive” (Haraway, 2011) cohabitation proposes a new way of understanding histories: living within the “pastpresent”, mindful of the present, aware of the past without situating the technological against the traditional or nature against culture.

By juxtaposing the claims of the developers with the building materials, I have shown the importance of infrastructure. In this subchapter, I have regarded the materiality of cement and its role in establishing Karstadt and its belonging/displacement at Hermannplatz. In this part I have introduced how we can view cement and its waste as agential in the process of building Karstadt. In the last subchapter, I will

investigate the effects of cleanliness and comfort and how these relate to the new proposal.

#### **4.4. More-than-human Hermannplatz: cleanliness and brown commons**

In this subchapter, I delve into how cleanliness and comfort help to sustain building plans. However, there are aspects of the reconstruction that contribute to the feeling that Hermannplatz should be renovated. The fears of my participants help SIGNA to continue with its plans. I argue that the comfort and cleanliness that people seek in Karstadt helps SIGNA to devise arguments that justify the revitalization of Hermannplatz. I focus on cleanliness and food, while at the same time, the innovations and aesthetics of new features such as Café Pala do not seem to be appealing. To illustrate that, I will juxtapose two vignettes from my field notes.

I enter the Karstadt café and I'm met by a really strong smell of cooked vegetables. It reminds me of the cafeteria at school. Today, they have on offer a variety of German cuisine: *Matjes Hausfrauenart* [pickled herring dish] , *Käsespätzle* [cheese gnocci], *Schnitzel*, and *Kohlrouladen* [cabbage rolls]. I hear the clinking of the glasses that someone takes away. Another person rearranges the vitrine, The place is worn down but pristine. A woman in her sixties is ordering at the counter. When she's asked what she takes, she says she needs to "first have a look". People 50+ sit at the tables, usually just on their own or in pairs. Based on their interactions, they're either acquaintances (some of them just met) or friends. Discussion topics: Covid, Covid vaccinations. (Fieldnote Café Karstadt 4<sup>th</sup> floor, 24.3. 2023)

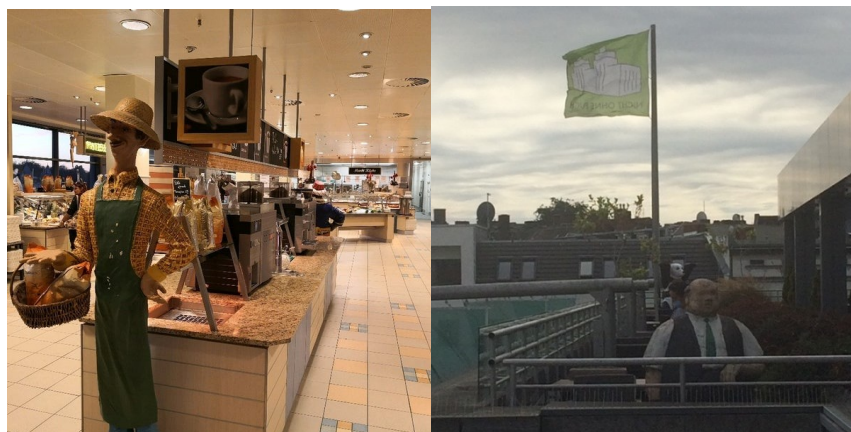


Image 8: interior of café Karstadt 4<sup>th</sup> floor. Sept 2020 Image 9: terrace 4<sup>th</sup> floor.

Sept 2020. Images by author



Café Pala in the parking lot is finally open. My partner jokes that she will take an avocado sandwich. I told her that this is a Greek cafe. Yet when we arrived at the counter, one of the few dishes happens to be the avo toast, the eponymous millennial sandwich.

Here the conversations are usually held in English, mostly racially diverse young urban people, except for another group of two middle-aged friends, who look several generations older than the rest of the audience, and speak German. They're playing Oasis, Cure and some contemporary pop. I can't imagine the retired women going up the stairs to the container. The food isn't bad but it tastes quite generic. When our two dishes arrive they taste exactly the same: it is just rearranged ingredients. Low on spicy, healthy food, no strong taste or colour, cream cheese, and vegetables surprise us in their tastelessness. No smells. As there are no laptops allowed, I'm scribbling these field notes on my phone. There are also no bathrooms so we go upstairs to café Karstadt to use the toilet. We pass a child at the Karstadt café sitting there with an adult doing homework without ordering any drinks (Field note, Café Pala, 3. April 2023)

According to Mol (2021) eating connects organisms to their surroundings. She relates this to Haraway's companion species – companion – cum panis (with bread) - humans are companions with the foods they eat. In her opinion, food is the place where species meet, bearing in mind that it is not a symmetrical relationship. While Chapter 3 focused on the decay of the department store, it is safe to note that also in terms of eating, most of my interviewees stress the gradual degradation of the quality of food.

The food that they consume is ultra-processed food, not fresh produce. Similar to shopping at Karstadt, food provides for a sensory and nostalgic experience. The women stress how they enjoy eating the colorful food.

Vera: It's always fresh and properly prepared.

Meike. Everything is clean and that's the main thing.

(Exchange Vera, Meike, 3. April 2023)

The women note the cleanliness of the space and the food. There is a connection between eating processed food and poverty and also people's economic background. The new Café Pala offers some more organic food, but it is not for the people who come

to the Karstadt café upstairs. Even though they say they eat healthily, what they consume is a lot of processed food. Eating here is connected to the convenience of shopping at the same time. Mol acknowledges that a lot of classification into “good” and “bad” comes into question when we speak about food. But processed food can also mean more food security. For some, the food provides a distraction from home. Liane comes because she can eat meat here (Café Pala is vegetarian).

This homeliness at café Karstadt refers to the experience of sitting together and eating food, and the feeling that they can meet and spend time together at any time (note: the café used to be open from 9 till 8 pm, since the pandemic the hours have been diminishing) in a “cultured” environment as I demonstrated in Chapter 4.1. The feeling of comfort is connected with the consumption of food and space. When it comes to Café Pala, according to Sabine, it does not provide the comfort the café at Karstadt does.

Sabine was the only one who has visited the new café. When I asked the other women why they did not want to visit Café Pala, they emphasized eating “their” food at café Karstadt, the comfortable seating, the undisturbed time and the community. Elfriede described the community around Hermannplatz in the following manner: “We’re mixed people, I always say that, some are coarser, others finer, but together we work quite well” (Elfriede, 27. March 2023).

When I entered Karstadt, most of the days the division between white Germans and German-Arab and German-Turkish people were apparent - there was only one Turkish woman in the coffee drinking circle but she did not want to talk to me. Edith complained that the communal living was not so great, she did not appreciate the fact that there were so many Turkish and Arab people. For some of the residents, the change was connected to the reunification of Germany. Edith described the consequences of reunification as ugly because “everyone was allowed in” [to move to Germany] (Interview with Edith, 24. March 2023). When the interviewees described the neighbourhood, they described it as Jewish (in the past) and Turkish/Arab (in the present).

When I was a child, Neukölln was a Jewish quarter. The entire Karl-Marx-Strasse was in Jewish hands. The shops too, the houses too, everything. That gradually changed. Then they moved away. People shopped there. My father only went there (in the Jewish shops). The last jeweller left in the 90s. (Meike, 3. April 2023).

After speaking with Meike, I set out to find out more about the Jewish inhabitants. Having imagined this part of Neukölln as a former Jewish neighborhood – basing this on the *Stolpersteine*<sup>22</sup> in the streets leading towards Hermannplatz, the stories of my Israeli friend about her grandfather spending time on the terrace of Karstadt, and living in a house owned by a Jewish family for generations, I was shocked not to find any information about Karl-Marx-Strasse and the shops. These archival silences– as Saidyia Hartman (2008) would call them – bring me to thoughts about the causes of these displacements and the disappearance of the shops.

I asked if the displacement of the Jewish shops was related to antisemitism after WW2 as it took many years for Germany to critically deal with the holocaust (see Fine & Spencer, 2018). Meike and her friend Vera told me that there was no antisemitism, and that the community worked well together. None of my interviewees spoke about anti-Semitic experiences, yet also none of them self-identified as Jewish. Yet, some respondents claimed that Jewish inhabitants had better, nicer shops. I cannot make any claims about the respondents’ identity or their direct experience with Jewish people. After speaking with Vera and Meike as well as other interviewees, I comprehended that these shops are *better* than the current shops in the neighbourhood (that Vera described as “Klimbim Laden” – “thrift shops”).

I could trace a certain nostalgia in the accounts of the 1970s as well as the 1950s when talking to my interviewees. This seemed to revolve around topics such as cleanliness, which seems to be a major component of nostalgia. And, without being said explicitly, cleanliness was connected with aspirations of whiteness (Alcoff, 2015). The feeling of comfort and its uniqueness within this space was echoed by all of my interviewees. According to Linda Alcoff (2015), whiteness presents “a historically emergent lived experience, variegated, changing, and changeable. For Linda Alcoff and other critical race theorists, whiteness as imagination is an important principle of societal organization, an ideal to which the Western society aspires and measures itself. Alcoff dates these ideals back to the creation the myths of European enlightenment, when whiteness was connected to brightness, lightness, whiteness became a powerful image (Alcoff, 2015, 108). These racial belongings have separated the citizens from the

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<sup>22</sup> Stolpersteine [stumbling stones] are concrete cubes in the pavement with plaques to remember the victims of the Holocaust.

“chaos” of Hermannplatz. Respondents appeared to be critical in discussions about multicultural living as can be seen in the following discussion:

Elisabeth: Hermannplatz is terrible, dirty, the homeless, it's terrible.

Rita: Now there are only Turkish shops. It used to be quieter, cleaner.

Elfriede: Hermannplatz is a reservoir – of drugs, alcohol, normal craftsmen, homeless people, many old people, - a “rustic” environment. They clean a lot, the BSR (Berlin city cleaners) but a lot more should happen, you have to focus on cleanliness. They could put up more waste bins

(excerpts from the interviews in March 2023)

Looking out of the window from the cafe in Karstadt, the women comment on the vegetables, the dirt, the pigeons. For my interviewees, Karstadt serves as a safe space from the outside where there is chaos. A safe space. Elisabeth told me she thinks that “it's good here in terms of cleanliness and the friendliness of the shop assistants.” This statement shows the contradictions in their descriptions: on the one hand, there are no more shopping assistants, while on the other, the shopping assistants are what brings them to Karstadt.

In the understanding of Mary Douglas (2002), dirt is matter out of place, a displaced material. In the idea of belonging, dirt is the matter that belongs to Hermannplatz. In Karstadt, the comfort and the goods that create the belonging; at Hermannplatz it is the dirt, the homelessness and the market stands. It is important to show how this perspective changes depending on context: when compared with the past and their own needs, the interviewees highlight the decline. But when compared to the decline outside, the café in Karstadt becomes a safe haven. German Turks do come to Karstadt but the coffee-drinking community is mostly white German. In this light, one could argue that the rebuilding plan of SIGNA is trying to adopt and extend the cleanliness of Karstadt into the cleanliness of Hermannplatz. Their proposal presents a design concept that encompasses an environment defined by elements of openness, brightness, and cleanliness. The descriptions notably exclude any reference to chaos or disorder.

I don't really like Hermannplatz so much, on the contrary, because all the dope smokers are here. There are a lot of people lying around, consuming drugs.

They're sleeping down there, Karstadt wants to tame the chaos down. It is very bad below (Gertrude, 28. March 2023).

This suggests that Karstadt shields the visitors from chaos and pain. In the following description, the interviewee conflates the situation at Hermannplatz with the current political situation.

What bothers me so much here: unemployment, homelessness. The need is great. Homeless people always come here. Aggressive people do too. I find it harassing. You can't do anything outside. They're also people. That's what bothers me here. And Hermannplatz – in general, there is no real order here. Everyone is irritated by Ukraine [war] and Corona. Every second person lives on Hartz4, the need is great, it has gotten worse. Karstadt shouldn't put up with all these people lying around. That [mess] looks cruel (Corinne, 23. March 2023).

This remark implies that my interviewee considers the Karstadt company responsible for establishing order, for “cleaning up the mess.” (Interview with Corinne, 23.March 2023). She considers it cruel to see this misery. This is a paternalistic responsibility that the SIGNA company appears to take upon itself - as it ultimately is considered to increase profit for their business. In this description my interviewees associate the not-clean, not-distinct components with otherness: the Turkish shopkeepers and homeless alcoholics together. By combing both the living (craftsmen) and non-living beings (drugs) they contrast the chaos of Hermannplatz against the clean and nice Karstadt. It is specifically the brown commons that are discussed by Munoz, that connect in the same way through their brown-in-commonness.

When I interviewed the young employee Alia, 19, Alia, a German-Palestinian who works for Karstadt, she described Hermannplatz in the following way:

It's different, because there are - how should I put it, more foreigners here than anywhere else, I would say. There's more street sales I would say [compared to other parts of Berlin, she refers to the vegetable stands]. And yes, quite different from let's say Friedrichshain. In any case, More foreigners. ... I'm Palestinian, but I have to admit I can speak better German than Arabic, so I would say that I'm more German but more foreign in appearance. So far, I

haven't had any problems with it. Of course there were a few funny looks but otherwise not.

While Aliya describes the fact that there are no problems for her, she does not feel entirely comfortable. MJ described to me that they prefer to live in a “bubble of other BIPOC”, rather than be integrated into the white German society. In their words, that shields them from racist and homophobic experiences.

For Muñoz (2020), the brown commons is something to aspire to, to help build, something that is utopian and yet already emerging. From the perspective of the homeless and the drug users - here it is rejected and abjected. The rejected, the pigeons, and the abjected are those who for now make Hermannplatz unmarketable for tourists. For the majority, they are invisible, and they are brown together. In the imagination of my interviewees, the cleanliness at Karstadt is what shielded them from the terrible, ‘brown’ Hermannplatz.

Some of my interviewees connect the dirtiness also with the omnipresent pigeons at Hermannplatz (“You can’t not notice the pigeons”, as one of the women told me). During my field observations of Hermannplatz, I could observe that the attitudes towards pigeons are various. While the women were mostly critical and disturbed by them, I noticed a regular pigeon feeder.

One day, I noticed a man that distributes bread and feeds the pigeons: In the end, he attends to the pigeons perched by the entrance of the Hermannplatz underground station. Prior to that, he snatches a piece of bread from an electrical box, tearing it into small fragments to scatter on the ground. (Field note, 5. April 2023)

Later I found out his name in a blog (Delikaya, 2022) article, that mentions his daily rounds around Hermannplatz and his interactions with others, including clearing out his shopping trolley and chatting with men enjoying their meals on a tree shelf. Ekmekçi Dede emphasizes the importance of this act for the birds' benefit. According to him, the pigeons could not consume an entire loaf of bread on their own therefore he needs to break it down. Upon reaching Hermannplatz, he disperses the breadcrumbs and observes the birds gracefully landing before him, cooing and fluttering their wings.

In 1980, Hermannplatz was again rebuilt because it was no longer considered nice and clean. Cleanliness and greenness go together. The work to keep Hermannplatz clean and to tend to the “urban gardens” will be done again by migrant workers. The Hermannplatz Initiative recently acquired an abandoned kiosk in front of Karstadt for the symbolic price of 1 euro. Perhaps not surprisingly, the first thing the activists did was clean for days to rid the kiosk's interior and exterior surfaces of decades-old frying oil, garbage, pigeon and rat droppings in order to be able to start working. So they first had to do the cleaning in order to continue their work. The brown commons of this place can induce some other proposals for change.

In this subchapter, I have observed how the topics of nostalgia and cleanliness can be outweighed by the resistance of brown commons. My observation of and interviews with the women from the cafe on the 4th floor expose the complexities and irreducibility of human and non-human coexistence, as some of the soon-to-be displaced patrons see the current Karstadt as a safe, clean space of whiteness and solidarity against the brown commons of Hermannplatz.

#### **4.5. Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have examined the more-than-human aspects that connect to the concepts of belonging at Karstadt, and that co-constitute gentrification and displacement in Neukölln. With the help of naturecultures (Haraway, 2003), in the first subchapter I have observed Karstadt building was imagined in the axis of nature-cultures. I argue that the terrace garden with its concerts has contributed to Karstadt's status as the most striking building in Berlin.

Subsequently I examine cement and its material agency in supporting this image of Karstadt. I posit that while cement contributed to its monumentality, after the building was bombed in WW2, its rubble has helped to establish the neighborhood's „wastelands“. An example would be the park Hasenheide, just opposite of Karstadt. The park is well-known for its queer cruising and raves, and through its aesthetics, The remnants of the bombed out Karstadt – the cemented wall as well as the cement foundation, that have not been destroyed, have laid a basis for swift future construction, and made it possible that Karstadt “survived” the WW2. Considering the current proposal by SIGNA, I have questioned the possibility of a sustainable reconstruction despite the developers claim about sustainability.

Besides cement and waste, I have delved again into the 1920s. This section has discussed the infrastructural innovations in the department store such as the cooling system. These infrastructures meant a social move for employees and extended assortment of goods for Karstadt customers, yet their materiality have negatively impacted the bodies of the employees. I argued for city allowing more unused projects as wastelands for communal projects instead of selling them to investors.

Lastly, I have discussed the current discourses of cleanliness and homeliness of café Karstadt. Taking the example of food in the café Karstadt as well as the Café Pala at Karstadt's parking lot, I have claimed that the feeling of comfort and cleanliness in café Karstadt contains a certain ambiguity, that both works against and in favor of SIGNA's plan for reconstruction. While the cleanliness, homeliness and comfort help to keep the popularity of café Karstadt amongst the retired women, at the same time, these narratives bear problematic connotations. The purity of this place stands against the square Hermannplatz that my interviewees consider dirty and chaotic. These narratives motivate SIGNA to consider in their plans a reconstruction of the whole Hermannplatz instead of just the Karstadt building, contributing to further displacement in the neighborhood.



## CONCLUSION

My thesis delves into the scandal surrounding the current reconstruction of Karstadt at Hermannplatz in Berlin-Neukölln, which serves as an emblematic example of the pressures exerted by the capitalist logic of gentrification. Through this gentrification case, I sought to explore how more-than-human cohabitation in a European metropolis is impacted by gentrification and how it shapes the transformation of the city. By examining various aspects of cohabitation, belonging, and displacement, my aim was to analyze the interconnectedness of singular gentrification narratives from a more-than-human perspective. Additionally, I aimed to investigate the ways in which nature-culture discourses inform urban planning. To accomplish this, I employed the concepts of material agency (Benett, 2010), political ecology (Latour, 2004), brown commons (Muñoz, 2020), naturecultures (Haraway, 2003), and viscous porosity (Tuana, 2008) from feminist new materialist theory.

In Chapter 1, I underscored the urgency of ecofeminist arguments that have questioned the pervasive nature-cultural divide since the 1970s. This strand of feminism has brought ecological concerns to the forefront of feminist theory and activism. I introduced the influential work of feminist scholar Donna Haraway, whose ideas have significantly shaped feminist new materialist and posthumanist theory. These scholars argue for decentering solely human narratives in favor of recognizing more-than-human entanglements. I also reviewed relevant scholarship on gentrification, emphasizing more-than-human accounts of displacement and critical anthropology informed by intersectional and multispecies lenses.

Chapter 2 outlined the research methodology employed in this project, which was grounded in feminist situated research. I discussed meaningful methodologies for the development of non-anthropocentric ethnography, such as sensory and affective methods. My research involved several months of fieldwork and interviews conducted with respondents in and around Karstadt at Hermannplatz. I introduced the main respondents, German retired women who are frequent clients of Karstadt store and café on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor, and are particularly invested in the preservation of the department store. Additionally, I employed affective reading of history as a method. The study was framed as a discursive analysis of the multifaceted case study of Karstadt at Hermannplatz from 2020 to 2023. I reflected on my personal biases as well as the ethical considerations that led me to refrain from contacting the Karstadt owner.

Chapter 3 provided a brief overview of the complex realities surrounding the reconstruction of Karstadt/Hermannplatz and considered the concerns of its opponents. I argued that the values underlying the rebuilding plan, based on the original construction from 1929, bear colonialist, heteronormative, and racist connotations. As many perceive the reconstruction as a case of greenwashing, I traced the focus on green values by the Karstadt owner SIGNA. I asserted that gentrification extends beyond mere architectural and demographic transformations, often entailing intersectional oppression. I discussed how art and activism can either support or disrupt gentrification.

.Lastly, I proposed that the relationship of my interviewees with the department stores can be understood as living in capitalist ruins (Tsing, 2015). I have argued that displacement encompasses intricate more-than-human relations and processes, such as ways of shopping, and destroys complex local ecologies. Additionally, I have researched the omitted experiences of retired women in the gentrification and displacement discourse, while recognizing the influence of these stores in perpetuating capitalist structures.

In Chapter 4, the focus of my research is directed towards the role of more-than-human actants in urban transformation. I argued that the historical imagination of Karstadt in naturecultures has enabled the department store to become a Berlin institution.

A discussion is presented on how the agency of materials, such as cement, rubble and modern infrastructural systems, directly influences the transformation of buildings and neighborhoods, and subsequently affects human embodiment. The findings of this study demonstrate the crucial and vibrant roles that non-human agents play in the interconnected economic, cultural, and ecological processes that facilitate gentrification. Through fieldwork and interviews conducted with retired women from the café located on the fourth floor, I uncover the complexities and irreplaceable nature of human and non-human cohabitation in relation to food and pigeons. Additionally, it becomes apparent that some of the soon-to-be displaced patrons perceive the current Karstadt as a safe, clean space associated with whiteness and solidarity, as a shield against the dirty and chaotic public space at Hermannplatz. By exploring the notion of cleanliness, I reveal hidden arguments about whiteness from both the perspective of white German pensioners and the developer.

I argue for the potential repurposing of these capitalist ruins as creative “wastelands” (Gandy, 2017) within the city.

As with any research project, I have had to confront my personal limitations in terms of time, resources, and skillset. Regarding my interview process, I acknowledge that I employed “strategic essentialism”<sup>23</sup> (Spivak, 1988), when dealing with the identity categories of my research participants. The inability to communicate in languages prevalent in the neighborhood, such as Turkish and Arabic, has hindered my ability to access a more diverse range of respondents. Notably, I regret not conducting more interviews with activists and individuals working at Hermannplatz. Initially, my research aimed to primarily focus on non-human entities; however, I quickly realized that my limited knowledge of architecture and construction materials prevented me from delving as deeply into these topics as the study deserves. A cooperation with an architect or sustainability expert as well a collaboration with a researcher with a Middle Eastern background would have certainly allowed a more intricate study.

Although I did explore material more-than-human entanglements, if this research would be extended, I would dedicate more attention to animals and plants. On a methodological level, I desired to incorporate more experimental approaches introduced in chapter 2. I would have liked to work further with soundscapes or delve deeper into sensory methods concerning food. However, due to a lack of experience and perhaps confidence, I relied predominantly on a more traditional fieldwork. I have achieved my objective of highlighting the intermaterial intricacies of nature-culture entanglements. Karstadt is presented as a place imbued with numerous interconnected narratives. The breadth of the study presents both strengths and limitations. On one hand, it allows for a comprehensive exploration of the topic. However, a potential alternative analysis could involve a more focused examination of specific stories and arguments.

Personally, the study has revealed that these entanglements extend deeper than initially anticipated. Through discursive analysis, I have demonstrated the possibility for an international investor to garner at least some level of support from the local community, despite the negative impact of these gentrification projects. Surprisingly, my investigation into SIGNA and their exact interests about Karstadt yielded limited

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<sup>23</sup> Strategic essentialism refers to a tactical approach that temporarily downplays internal differences within a group in order to prioritize unity and advance political objectives.

information. After nearly three years of engagement with this cause, I understood their main objective as simple accumulation of more wealth.

In my imagination, “capitalist ruins” like Karstadt could be utilized in various ways, including as cultural centers or accommodations for those in need, rather than luxury properties for millionaires. With a more proactive urban agenda, the cooperation between activists and artists and city council can alter these projects and repurpose them for the benefit of the community. However, providing the necessary time and resources for such endeavors is becoming increasingly challenging under the capitalist pressures. I was surprised to discover the effective prospects for resistance, as exemplified by Initiative Hermannplatz. Equally I contemplate about the further potential of resistance from plants and other non-human agents.

This reconstruction proposal support the notion that cities are becoming increasingly complex, with local and global property ownership intersecting (Beveridge et al, 2022). At the time of writing, no definitive decisions have been made. The negotiations may continue for an extended period, or SIGNA might abandon the project in favor of more financially viable investments. Perhaps the plants will reclaim the area, leading to a scenario of wasteland emerging as an alternative to the hybrid global investment.

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