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# Introduction: Resignifications of Feminism in Contemporary Germany

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## Introduction: Resignifications of Feminism in Contemporary Germany

### **Abstract**

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## Introduction: Resignifications of Feminism in Contemporary Germany

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During the past decade, the German-speaking world has witnessed both a new wave of writing by women and a resurgence of interest in and debate about feminism. This special issue addresses these two phenomena in tandem, contemplating the interconnections between the new women's writing and the return of feminism in the German context.<sup>1</sup> Moving beyond the infantilizing label *Fräuleinwunder* 'miracle girls,' deployed in journalistic criticism to describe the emergence of a new generation of German women writers, the essays collected here offer contextualized readings that explore generic, formal, and content-based connections among contemporary women's texts.<sup>2</sup> Situating these literary texts and the contentious debates about feminism in Germany today within a larger history of feminist writing and activism, the essays examine the generational contests and political investments at stake in second- and third-wave feminism and postfeminism.

This special issue also offers the first sustained critical attention in English to the specifically German variant of contemporary feminism called popfeminism. Contributors build on and interrogate the insights of popfeminism, articulated in recent books like Sonja Eismann's anthology *Hot Topic: Popfeminismus heute* 'Hot Topic: Popfeminism Today' (2007); Mirja Stöcker's collection *Das F-Wort: Feminismus ist sexy* 'The F-Word: Feminism is Sexy' (2007); Meredith Haaf, Susanne Klingner, and Barbara Streidl's collaborative manifesto *Wir Alpha-Mädchen: Warum Feminismus das Leben schöner macht* 'We Alpha Females: Why Feminism Makes Life Nic-er' (2008); and Jana Hensel and Elisabeth Raether's joint memoir

*Neue Deutsche Mädchen* 'New German Girls' (2008). In particular, the contributions to this issue consider discourses of authenticity, identity, and performativity as they have taken shape in popfeminism as well as in previously articulated feminist and queer theories of gender and sexuality. In examining textual responses to gender construction and performance, these articles also confront the most salient contemporary feminist political concerns, including sexuality, the body, motherhood, and work, all implicated in the recent demography debates, which have held women responsible for the falling German birthrate.<sup>3</sup> Finally, these essays reflect on and question the ongoing relevance of the label women's literature, whether as essentializing classification, marketing tag, or analytical category. Attesting to the diversity of contemporary women's writing in German—from bestsellers to genre fiction, from pop literature to experimental feminist writing—this volume ultimately addresses the important fact that female authors continue to interrogate gender roles and constructions in feminist ways, even as both women's literature and feminist theory move beyond the gender binary. The diverse group of scholars contributing to this issue thus provides an urgent critical response to salient questions about subjectivity, agency, authorship, gender, sexuality, and identity that are newly relevant in the twenty-first century.

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall and German reunification in 1990, German literature has been characterized by a number of related trends.<sup>4</sup> Turning away from the so-called *Gesinnungsästhetik* 'aesthetics of conviction' that characterized post-World War II literature on both sides of divided Germany, writers in the postwall era have purportedly abrogated any explicit political agenda in their work. On the one hand, this has led to a literature of normalization, where German culture (and by extension national identity) is no longer marked by the special status accorded to it after National Socialism and the Holocaust and during the era of partition (Taberner). On the other hand, young writers emerged during this period whose relationship to the Nazi past was more distant, in part due to generational affiliation; indeed, as a result generation has become a prominent category of analysis and point of discussion.<sup>5</sup>

Pop constitutes a central tendency in the work of many writers from this younger generation (Baßler; Ernst). Characterized by

bricolage or sampling of an array of styles, pop literature recycles elements of the pop art and culture movement of the 1960s (for this reason it is sometimes referred to as Pop II). Known for their *Lust am Erzählen* ‘pleasure in narrating’ and *Neue Lesbarkeit* ‘new readability’ as well as plotlines grounded in youth culture, pop authors ostensibly are not weighted down by the engagement with national history and identity that preoccupied previous generations of German writers. Nonetheless, the tendency to view their work as superficial or apolitical is categorically disputed by the essays collected here.

The trope of pop cuts across the two focal points of this collection, constituting both a literary style engaged by many of the writers under consideration and an impetus for redefining feminism among a new generation of Germans. Thomas Ernst has described pop literature, which took hold in Germany during the decade after unification, as a “reaction to a changed world”: “In this changed world the dissolution of borders and the expansion of a hegemonic economic, political and cultural system in the image of American culture appear to be advancing the process that has come to be termed ‘globalisation’” (“German Pop” 170). While mainstream pop writing often seems to reflect an affirmative vision of the changes brought about by globalization and neoliberalism, not least through its highly realistic language, Ernst nonetheless emphasizes “pop literature’s potential to use language not only to describe the world around us, but also to undermine or expand our perception of it” (“German Pop” 170). Pop’s subversive potential derives at least in part from the fact that, historically, it was never anchored in the dominant culture of Germany, allowing it to posit itself as “a projection screen for strategies of resistance” (Ernst, “German Pop” 170).

“Popfeminism must also be understood in this vein,” as Katja Kauer emphasizes in her analysis of the approach, “as a counterdiscourse within hegemonic contemporary culture, which in the first instance puts dominant conceptions of gender to the test” (95-96).<sup>6</sup> At times affirmative and largely individualistic in its stance, popfeminism, like pop literature, arises in reaction to a changed world, where the promise of equality is bankrupt. Popfeminism derives from a combination of factors: it builds on the generational affiliations and youth culture of pop; it emerges as both a symptom of

and a point of orientation within the neoliberal political/economic system that has characterized Germany since the fall of the wall; and it reacts against the demography debates that hold women (and feminism itself) responsible for the changes wrought by neoliberal policies.

In Germany and throughout the West, the influence of feminism has been in decline ever since the peak of the second wave in the 1970s, despite attempts to develop a more affirmative version of feminism under rubrics like “gender mainstreaming” or “third wave.” Various diagnosed as a backlash against feminism or as postfeminism, reactions against feminism over the last three decades have variously taken on the form of overt, venomous attacks or of more subtle attempts to discredit the necessity of feminism in an era when its main goals have supposedly already been accomplished (Haaf, Klingner, and Streidl 16-20, 193-94; Tasker and Negra; Genz and Brabon).

More recently, as Angela McRobbie has shown, a new and more insidious version of postfeminism has come to predominate in the West, “marked by a new kind of anti-feminist sentiment” (1). Fundamentally different from a backlash, this postfeminism derives from a paradoxical situation in which feminism has “achieved the status of common sense, while it [is] also reviled, almost hated” (6). Thus, as McRobbie argues, postfeminism becomes a kind of substitute for feminism, manufacturing the consent of young women by offering them “a notional form of equality” (2) while at the same time actively vilifying feminism in order to dismantle it once and for all. McRobbie’s account of contemporary Britain emphasizes the undoing of feminism through the twin gestures of guaranteeing women’s equality via a discourse of individualism, freedom, and choice while disavowing feminism as both vile and unnecessary, leading young women to reject feminism while also ostensibly profiting from its gains.

In this context, the emergent popfeminism offers an explicitly activist renegotiation of the feminist agenda on the part of young women in Germany. Drawing on central tropes of pop including pastiche, remixing, and resignification, popfeminists actively redefine feminism for a new generation, a new cultural and political scene, and a new historical era. Kauer’s account of the emergence

of popfeminism emphasizes the agency of young feminists, who sample elements of three decades of feminist theory and practice, aiming to “reconcile a feminist consciousness with conceptions of femininity that were socially produced, without the necessity of automatically rejecting all performances of femininity” (138).

As evidenced especially by women’s writing over the last decade, the cultural productions of young feminists actively address issues raised by the undoing of feminism. These include the perception of feminism as stridently anti-male, anti-sex, and anti-pleasure; the idea that criticizing the beauty myth automatically entails foregoing make-up and fashion entirely; as well as issues raised by the demography debates, including the myth of women’s equality in the workplace and the politics of motherhood. Whereas postfeminism encourages “young women...to collude with the re-stabilisation of gender norms so as to undo the gains of feminism, and dissociate themselves from this now discredited political identity” (McRobbie 64), popfeminists self-consciously adopt the term feminism and actively redefine feminist theory and practice.

Haaf, Klingner, and Streidl put it most succinctly when they state, “The cool thing: Our generation can redefine feminism. We don’t have to be roped in by anyone, not even by the old women’s movement” (20). Similarly, Jenny Warnecke suggests in *Das F-Wort*: “The results of the women’s movement are by no means solidly anchored in our society, rather they are manufactured on a daily basis, contingent on the situation, and renegotiated again and again....As an ‘f-word’-feminist one could invent a new term, for example ‘the f-word.’ This is a playing field for positive associations and actions... By ‘appropriating the terminology,’ one could rehabilitate feminism’s reputation” (34). Writing specifically about popfeminism, Eismann declares: “It is not about exacting another pound of already strained female flesh in order to make the principles of feminism palatable to the surface phenomenon of pop with a suitably made-up female surface. To the contrary, it is about perforating and shaking up pop culture with feminist strategies” (10). As these statements suggest, popfeminism’s eclectic approach and resignifying strategies mean that it is constantly reinventing the wheel rather than learning from previous feminist movements, something that is echoed by its apparent rejection of collective political action. Both of these elements

have been points of contention in popfeminism's evaluation and reception. Ultimately, popfeminism adopts an individualistic and performative notion of feminism, which resists dogmatic agendas and rejects fixed identities.

The contributors to this special issue differ in their assessments of popfeminism's success in redefining feminism convincingly. However, all find in contemporary women's literature a space of cultural production that responds in nuanced and reflective ways to feminist debates and issues. Charting the roots of popfeminism to the unrest and performativity of German pop, Carrie Smith-Prei argues that the movement opens up spaces of resistance:

Popfeminism in its broadest sense playfully approaches "traditional" feminist interests by uniting gender issues, women's rights, and body politics with elements of popular culture inspired ... by music, new media, and fashion. Popfeminism utilizes the symbols of global pop culture in order to create a critical, local, and individual subculture, a new public and visible space of resistance defined, not constrained, by gender.

By contrast, Margaret McCarthy remains wary of popfeminism's emphasis on individual agency and the significance of performativity, as well as its resistance to collective politics, expressed most succinctly in its rejection of second-wave feminism. With sustained attention to the generational contests that define popfeminism, McCarthy questions the possibility of creating a feminist social movement that reflects the conceptual turns of feminist theory, highlighting an aporia within the theoretical work of feminist and queer studies that has emerged since the publication of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* in 1990.

While she is largely skeptical of popfeminism, however, McCarthy finds in recent women's texts sustained attention to conflicts within feminism that offer more promising points of departure for a resignification of feminism in contemporary German culture. Smith-Prei, McCarthy, and Corinna Kahnke offer analyses that focus explicitly on pop texts and the connections between feminism and pop; all three emphasize body politics, sexuality, and gender roles. Smith-Prei examines the resignification of feminist body politics in the videos and raps of Lady Bitch Ray and in the popular novels of Charlotte Roche (*Feuchtgebiete* 'Wetlands' (2008; 2009)) and



Sarah Kuttner (*Mängelexemplar* ‘Damaged Goods’ (2009)), arguing that all three recode the female body as a site of resistance. Reading Roche’s *Feuchtgebiete* together with two earlier pop texts, Alexa Hennig von Lange’s *Relax* (1999) and Elke Naters’s *Lügen* ‘Lies’ (1999), McCarthy argues that all three novels stage conflicts between affirmation and revolt that shed light on generational and political debates within feminism. Focusing in particular on the representation of sexuality, female fantasy, and the question of porn, as well as on mother-daughter relationships in these texts, and attending to the protagonists’ own experiences of conflicts between second-wave and next-wave feminisms, McCarthy ultimately finds that the novels propose ways of bridging these conflicts and, indeed, of resignifying feminism progressively. Hennig von Lange’s *Relax* also forms the focal point of Kahnke’s analysis, which traces the prehistory of popfeminism. With a close reading of the way *Relax* destabilizes normative gender and sexual identities, Kahnke argues that pop texts of the 1990s anticipated the emergence of popfeminism nearly a decade later. Kahnke’s queer reading of *Relax* provides a rejoinder to claims of pop literature’s apoliticism, while also identifying some limitations of pop strategies of performativity and self-stylization for emancipation from misogyny and heteronormativity.

Alexandra Merley Hill and Florence Feiereisen expand the focus of this special issue by examining literary contributions that open up new ways of thinking about two central issues in recent feminist debates: the politics of motherhood and women in the workplace. Hill and Feiereisen also analyze the works of two of the most lauded authors in the contemporary literary scene, Julia Franck and Katrin Röggla. Comparing the representation of motherhood in three recent women’s texts, Tanja Dücker’s *Himmelskörper* ‘Heavenly Bodies’ (2003), Kathrin Schmidt’s *Die Gunnar-Lennefsen-Expedition* ‘The Gunnar-Lennefsen Expedition’ (1998), and Franck’s *Die Mittagsfrau* ‘The Blind Side of the Heart’ (2007; 2009), Hill finds in Franck’s text a new depiction of motherhood as a performative identity. Building on Butler’s notion of gender trouble and Franck’s novel, Hill coins the term “maternal drag” to conceptualize a new modality of parenting, unhinged from essentializing corporeal connections. Feiereisen offers a close reading of Röggla’s 2004 novel *Wir schlafen nicht* ‘We Never Sleep,’ a feminist text that works with

strategies of documentary and collage to portray gendered capitalism and its connections to the New Economy workplace in the era of globalization. Feiereisen analyzes the way Rögglä interweaves representations of performative gender roles and deteriorating social and economic structures to articulate a critique of the impact of neoliberalism in Germany, with its disproportionate effects on women.

In the final two essays of this volume, Faye Stewart and Brenda Bethman analyze developments in genre fiction, ultimately reconceptualizing the role of genre in connection with women's literature. Stewart analyzes two collections of feminist and queer crime fiction published over the last two decades, Pieke Biermann's *Mit Zorn, Charme, und Methode* 'With Wrath, Charm, and Method' (1992) and Lisa Kuppler's *Queer Crime* (2002), examining the way they use popular genre fiction (and in particular the male-dominated genre of crime) to give voice to previously marginalized and stereotyped identities. Offering comparative close readings of three pairs of stories, Stewart attends to the shifting representation of gender and sexuality across the two collections as well as the dramatically different narrative structures and genre traits they display, arguing for a new subgenre of crime fiction that she calls queer crime:

Queer mysteries narrativize identity as messy, performative, and spinning out along multiple axes, juxtaposing these constructions with the search for identity and identification that lies at the heart of the crime genre. Queer crime highlights the work of reading—and misreading—in solving the mystery by choosing among multiple possible meanings and interpretations.

Like Stewart, Bethman redefines the boundaries of popular genre fiction, in this case chick lit. Productively reading the global best-seller *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) by Helen Fielding alongside two German-language novels, Karen Duve's *Dies ist kein Liebeslied* 'This is Not a Love Song' (2000; 2005) and Marlene Streeruwitz's *Jessica, 30*. (2004), Bethman argues for an expanded conceptualization of women's literature, which has too often been defined by literary critics as the purview only of explicitly feminist-political novels. Similarly, she complicates narrowly defined classifications of feminism, examining the overlap among second- and third-wave feminism and postfeminism. By arguing for the elimination of hierarchical

distinctions, Bethman brings the volume full circle to remind us of the subversive potential of pop, which is historically anti-order, posing a threat to all hierarchies, including those of gender and sexuality.

#### Notes

1 I would like to thank the contributors to this issue for taking my thinking about feminism, gender, sexuality, and women's cultural production in new directions. I am also grateful to Ryan Long for his intellectual support of this project as well as for his co-parenting.

2 The term *Fräuleinwunder* was coined by the literary critic Volker Hage in the German news magazine *Der Spiegel*. See Hage, "Literarisches Fräuleinwunder" and "Ganz schön abgedreht."

3 For more on the demography debates, see Haaf, Klinger, and Streidl 153-78; Hill, "Female Sobriety"; Schrupp; Stöcker, "Die Sache"; and contributions to this issue by Feiereisen, Hill, and Smith-Prei.

4 For a useful overview of these, see Gerstenberger and Herminghouse.

5 The most well-known labels for the younger generation include "Generation Golf" 'Generation VW-Rabbit' (coined by the writer Florian Illies) and "Generation Berlin" (coined by the sociologist Heinz Bude). On the subject of generation in post-unification German literature and culture, see also Eigler; Fuchs; and Giorgio and Waters.

6 All translations are my own.

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