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## Intercourse as Discourse in Alexa Hennig von Lange's *Relax*

### Abstract

While gender has long been an abiding concern of *Popliteratur*, pop writers (in particular female authors) are often criticized for simply reflecting, if not positively endorsing, negative forms of postfeminism—an attitude that negates the accomplishments of emancipation by regressing to traditional ideas of what it means to be a woman. Some critics suggest that pop texts re-inscribe the gender binary by presenting, even glorifying, long-established gender roles. In response to such a reception, this article investigates Alexa Hennig von Lange's iconic but much criticized novel *Relax* (1999) in order to illustrate the reflective and critical nature of *Popliteratur*. I demonstrate how Hennig von Lange critically engages with images of masculinity, femininity and feminism, thereby queering (that is to say de-stabilizing), pre-conceived notions of gender and identity. Ultimately, texts such as *Relax* foreshadow the demands of the new popfeminists roughly a decade later.

### Keywords

gender, popliterature, female authors, postfeminism, gender binary, gender roles, Alexa Hennig von Lange, *Relax*, masculinity, femininity, feminism, queer, queering, gender identity

Intercourse as Discourse in  
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I.

*Popliteratur* 'pop literature' exploded onto the German literary scene in the mid 1990s and immediately became the subject of much debate. Feuilletons raved about the pros and cons of the new genre, its authors, its styles, and its preferred topics and themes. This relatively young genre generally shows a preference for prose in which narrative, commentaries, and sometimes even theoretical considerations intertwine. *Popliteratur* replicates spoken language patterns and slang vocabulary; it also takes a positive stance towards the strong presence of media in young people's lives, finding its themes in everyday life and popular culture, especially in musical subcultures and the party scene. The genre takes its inspiration from life's surfaces, while also delving beyond superficiality—without, however, aiming for authenticity. Consequently, *Popliteratur* becomes part of the existing pop culture by watching, reporting on, and reflecting it.

The first important landmark for the genre was the publication of *Faserland* 'Babble/Father-Land' (1995) by Christian Kracht, an author who is widely considered to be the godfather of *Popliteratur*.<sup>1</sup> Kracht set the subject and tone for works to follow through his use of fast cuts and brand names as both narrative elements and cultural critique. Subsequent authors such as Florian Illies and Benjamin von Stuckrad-Barre claim Kracht as their patron saint (Baßler 110-11).

Questions of gender and identity have always been at the heart of *Popliteratur*. To name but a few texts: *Faserland* engages with what

Baßler calls a “missed coming-out” (36); Stuckrad-Barre’s *Soloalbum* (1998) explores a crisis of masculinity; Thomas Meinecke’s *Tomboy* (1998) delivers a literary version of Judith Butler’s gender discourse; Elke Naters’s *Lügen* ‘Lies’ (1999) depicts the feminist/postfeminist debate; and Jana Hensel’s *Zonenkinder* ‘After the Wall’ (2002; 2004) offers a fully gendered narrative of German unification.

Confronted with the loss of traditional identity markers and the collapse of the gender binary, members of the *Generation Golf* ‘Generation VW Rabbit’ utilize alternative, seemingly superficial means of identity formation, for example consumerism and the materiality of products.<sup>2</sup> *Popliteratur* also suggests sex as another tangible and extremely physical way to establish personal identity, and it is for this reason that sexuality is one of the most prominent tropes of the genre. Within *Popliteratur*, sexual acts serve not only as alternative identity markers but also provide a discourse on the condition of the *Generation Golf*.

Although many critics perceive the emphasis on gender and sexuality within 1990s *Popliteratur* to be a marketing strategy in order to raise sales numbers, this is clearly not the whole story (Ernst; Lottmann; Storeide). While it is true that in many pop texts sexual interaction (or lack thereof) is quite central or prominent, its function is not a simple sales pitch.<sup>3</sup> Rather, sex gives voice to un-spoken issues and becomes the language through which the *Generation Golf* negotiates internal, external and societal crises of self-understanding, in addition to interpersonal relations.

While gender has been an abiding concern of the genre, pop writers (in particular female authors) are often criticized for reflecting, if not endorsing, postfeminism, that is, an attitude that negates the accomplishments of emancipation by regressing to traditional ideas of what it means to be a woman. Some critics state that texts such as Naters’s *Lügen* and Alexa Hennig von Lange’s *Relax* (1999) re-inscribe the gender binary by presenting, or even glorifying, long-established gender roles (Ullmaier; Taberner; Wagner). Critics also categorize these writers with negative terms such as *Fräuleinwunder* ‘miracle girls.’<sup>4</sup>

In response to such a reception, I have purposefully chosen Hennig von Lange’s iconic but much criticized *Relax* in order to illustrate my reading of the reflective and critical nature of *Poplit-*

*eratur's* engagement with feminism, gender roles, and identity. This essay shows how *Popliteratur* thereby queers (that is to say de-stabilizes), pre-conceived notions of gender and identity in and for the *Generation Golf*. Ultimately, I suggest that 1990s pop texts problematize and foreshadow what the so-called popfeminists demand roughly a decade later in works such as Thea Dorn's *Die neue F-Klasse* 'The New F-Class' (2007), Mirja Stöcker's *Das F-Wort* 'The F-Word' (2007), Hensel and Elisabeth Raether's *Neue deutsche Mädchen* 'New German Girls' (2008), Sonja Eismann's reader *Hot Topic* (2007), or the collection *Wir Alphamädchen* 'We Alpha-Girls' (2009), edited by Meredith Haaf, Susanne Klinger, and Barbara Streidl.

A closer look at *Relax* demonstrates that sex functions as a discursive platform on which a variety of issues pertaining to the *Generation Golf* are portrayed and negotiated. Exemplary for the genre of *Popliteratur*, *Relax* addresses breakdowns in traditional meaning, conventions and hierarchies associated with traditional gender roles, coming of age, power structures, religion, and other negotiated sites of identity. Furthermore, sexual encounters (or the lack thereof) also operate as an attempt at communication—intercourse as an alternative form of discourse—among the characters themselves in an effort to accommodate the failure of traditional verbal interaction.

Written by a female author in the male-dominated genre of *Popliteratur*, *Relax* has often been criticized for its explicit portrayal of sexuality and its extensive descriptions of drug use. Critics claim that its shock value makes *Relax* seem revolutionary, but that it actually represents traditional gender roles in an affirmative vein. A slightly different take on the novel is offered by Anke Biendarra, who suggests that the postfeminist generation portrays relations between the sexes with more irony and distance than their predecessors, since younger authors did not experience discrimination first hand, leading to less political writing (231-32). Contrary to such a reading, this essay aims to show how, rather than losing its political impetus, *Popliteratur* creates a platform to negotiate the issues of *Generation Golf*, in part through its deployment of a strongly readerly style of writing.

II.

*Relax* presents itself as a novel written from two perspectives: male and female. The text is divided into two parts, each with three chapters narrated in the first person. As Ansgard Warner writes, this structure transposes the fragility of contemporary gender identity onto a formal level and re-instates the so-called battle of the sexes (75, 83). Warner reads *Relax* as offering two inherently different perspectives, suggesting essential differences between men and women. While it is true that the gender binary is mirrored in the novel's structure, the parallels between the two narratives outweigh the partitioning of the novel. Rather than a reinscription of traditional gender roles, the novel thus presents a structural expression of the distinction between male and female as functioning categories. Not so much a battle of the sexes, *Relax* portrays the break-down of the gender binary experienced subjectively by each protagonist.

Typical for *Popliteratur*, the narrative of *Relax* offers snapshots of a relatively short moment in time. Alice Boguslawa Bobrzycky points out that, even though the plot seems to contain action, this effect is mainly caused by the uncoordinated reflections and fantasies of the protagonists; nothing really “happens” (10). The first part of the novel is told from the viewpoint of Chris, a young man who narrates his adventures over the course of one weekend, which he spends mostly partying with his friends and in clubs, where he imbibes myriad drinks and drugs. The second part is told from the perspective of his girlfriend, who is only named *die Kleine* ‘the little one.’ While it is quite common for protagonists of *Popliteratur* to remain nameless, it is surprising in this instance, since the name of the male protagonist, Chris, is given to the reader. Wagner reads this namelessness as a strategy of *Popliteratur*, utilizing “typenhafte Figuren” ‘type-like figures’ (359), which are more accessible to readers, allowing them to identify with the characters, while filling informational gaps with personal details. This namelessness also illustrates the self-image of the female protagonist, who initially sees herself as an attachment to Chris: she does not feel that she possesses a discrete subjectivity. Yet, rather than delivering flat characters, such a strategy opens up spaces for identity construction on the part of both the female protagonist and the reader.

While Chris is out partying, *die Kleine* waits patiently for him

to come home and spend some time with her. Both characters thus operate within traditional notions of the gender binary, while at the same time consciously and unconsciously trying to step beyond conventional roles, as each independently experiences the breakdown of gender as an identity-forming category. This leads not only to a crisis of masculinity and femininity respectively, but to an overall identity crisis in the novel, which is repeatedly sublimated through intoxication. Rather than communicating their feelings, the characters retreat into the safety of changed states of mind, fleeing from reality. Far from serving solely as a sales pitch for *Popliteratur*, the hedonism portrayed in *Relax*, just like its representation of sexuality, conveys a discourse of crisis.

Chris wants to live his life as a rock star, as indicated by the wishful statement with which the novel opens: "Mann. Ich bin ein Rockstar" 'Man, I'm a rock star' (9). Of course, Chris is not actually a rock star, so this statement is extremely ironic. Even Chris's life of drugs, his ostensible sexual prowess, and his performances of masculinity present a parody of the rock star life, since they only borrow the trappings of glory. His main goal is to party as much as possible, a sentiment familiar from other paradigmatic texts of *Popliteratur*. Drugs (marijuana, speed, cocaine, ecstasy and alcohol) play a central role in this self-created stardom. The book ends with Chris apparently dying in his girlfriend's arms of an overdose—the narrative does not spell it out that precisely, but the author has referred to Chris's *Drogentod* 'death by drug overdose' in interviews (Müller, 99). This overdose is not only the dramatic finale of the novel, but also breaks the assumed glory of the rock star image that Chris has created for himself. The specific concept of rock-star masculinity, so appealing to the *Generation Golf*, is in crisis here: Chris's performance of masculinity is not only useless, but fatal, with tragic death part and parcel of the stereotype rock star.

By sharing intimate details of his sex life with his friends, Chris reinforces his performance of stardom by portraying himself as so attractive that his girlfriend cannot even keep her hands off him in public spaces. While sex is constantly thematized by the characters at a discursive level, however, the only real sexual action in the novel is masturbation. In that the novel portrays the breakdown of normative roles, the characters' inability to perform sexually is a further

indication of identity crisis. In fact, fantasy and homosociality come to replace actual desire. Yet at the same time, Chris is uncomfortable with female sexual aggression, whether his girlfriend initiates sex or engages in non-normative sexual practices. Being sexually provocative does not conform with stereotypical female behavior, and the female protagonist's sexual aggression might even make Chris seem like less of a man. Therefore, he places her actions in a context that boosts his rock star image.

When Chris contemplates his girlfriend's wish for a child, he comments that she should have a child if it makes her happy (contrary to the reader's expectation that Chris would reject something that does not fit into his self-styled life of sex, drugs and techno music). It is remarkable, though, that he talks about this decision as utterly unconnected to himself. Rather than planning on a family, which would be a very traditional lifestyle, he attaches the potential child to his girlfriend; he himself would be involved only on the production level: "Kein schlechter Gedanke, meiner kleinen Ficksau ein Kind zu machen. Zack. Abgespritzt und schon bist du zu dritt" 'Not a bad idea, to make my little fuck sow a child. Wham. Squirt off and already there's three of you' (19). Chris's crude way of describing how he would impregnate his girlfriend reinforces his rock star image: his sexual prowess would be confirmed by procreation. Yet at the same time, this image is destabilized by the phrase *zu dritt* 'three of you,' which hints at his subliminal wish for a family of which he would be a part. While Chris constructs his own masculinity in a seemingly traditional way—via rock stardom, partying, sexual prowess—there are moments where this performance is broken.

For example, Chris participates in the destabilization of his own heterosexuality in an episode at a bar with his friend Lenny: "Ich habe Lenny komplett meine Zunge in den Mund geschoben. War gut, mal was anderes. Männer küssen komplett anders als Frauen" 'I pushed my tongue completely into Lenny's mouth. Was good, something else for a change. Men kiss completely differently than women' (23). Originally, he performs this homoerotic encounter for Doris, the barkeeper, presumably to shock and simultaneously attract her.<sup>5</sup> In that respect, even the queer, or non-normative, encounter of kissing a man can be read as re-affirming traditional gender roles. And

yet, this encounter undermines the straight male identity that Chris performs for his friends since he *enjoys* the kiss with Lenny.

Having downed another shot of liquor to encourage himself, Chris finally approaches Lenny with the words: "Mann. Richtig geknutscht ham wir, was Lenny?" 'Man. We totally smooched, didn't we, Lenny?' (24). Subsequently, Chris qualifies the event by announcing that he was high at the time, thereby offering himself, as well as his friend, an excuse for their behavior. By framing this episode within a party and drug-induced situation, male kissing is contextualized as hip, rather than as a homoerotic encounter. The short conversation that ensues between Lenny and Chris concentrates on the drugs they consumed that night and ends with the decision to drink another round of shots. There is, however, a strong discrepancy between the protagonist's thoughts and his actual conversation; in his mind, he assigns a deeper meaning and emotional closeness to Lenny that was expressed in the kiss. He wants to follow up on what happened, as he feels some kind of communication to be necessary, yet again verbal discourse fails him, and only sexual interaction remains. What one finds here is a re-mix of gender stereotypes and clichés, which, rather than simply affirmative, is employed to illustrate the crisis of masculinity and demonstrate the possibility of new meanings and attempts at identity construction.

In the second part of the book, the narrative voice changes: the female protagonist gives her account of the same weekend. She exhibits highly contradictory gender traits—at times traditionally submissive, at times aggressive, even dominant—which critics have generally read as a weakness of this character. However, these contradictory traits also foreshadow Eismann's analysis of the negative connotations that feminism carries for the *Generation Golf* and the ongoing need for female and feminist role models, "weil es in den meisten Bereichen keine (sichtbaren) weiblichen Genealogien gibt und deswegen jede Generation von Frauen [...] das völlig deprimierende Gefühl bekommt, [...] vor ihr sei keine Frau gewesen" 'because in most areas there are no (visible) female genealogies, and therefore every woman's generation has the depressing feeling that before her, there was no woman' (Mohr). In fact, *Relax* narrativizes contemporary debates about postfeminism, which lets go of the achievements of second-wave feminism and returns to a view of

women as inferior to and dependent on men. Annette Wagner reads the novel's setting as a reflection on how "[...] die Auflösung der Rollenklischees auf der normativen Ebene den faktischen Veränderungen im Alltag widerspricht" 'the dissolution of role clichés on a normative level contradicts the factual changes in everyday life' (377). The protagonist's very inability to choose from the models offered by media and society, and the seemingly contradictory nature of her desires and thoughts, present a criticism of traditional paradigms of gender and sexuality.

According to Bobrzycky, *die Kleine* tries on different styles of self, ranging from "dominatrix" to "romantic bride" or "waiting housewife" without ever making a clear choice for any of those roles (14). Instead, she escapes into her imagination, which is fed by clichés and media quotes. The fact that she does not decide on any of the pre-fabricated roles in fact signals her comprehension (whether conscious or subconscious) of their instability and failure. The female protagonist thus serves as a symbol of the breakdown of traditional gender roles, since she demonstrates how this breakdown leads to a specific crisis of femininity, in which sexuality becomes a tool of imagination.

The female protagonist presents herself initially according to traditional gender roles: she is waiting for Chris to come home and dreaming of a wedding. Yet, the narrative is contradictory from the beginning: while on the one hand she exhibits very traditional female behavior, on the other hand she dreams of a non-traditional Las Vegas wedding, a fact that reconfigures her desire by locating the traditional ceremony within a campy framework.<sup>6</sup> The protagonist appears to reproduce ideologically traditional values when she states: "Aber ich meine, ich bin eine Frau, und Frauen müssen Kinder kriegen. Das ist einfach Berufung" 'But I mean, I am a woman, and women must have children. That is simply our calling' (252). However, her reflections on women's roles are contradicted by more empowering and aggressive undertones. To pass the time without Chris, she engages in a sexual fantasy in which the comic book character Vampirella plays a central role.<sup>7</sup> The female protagonist adopts this fantasy immediately after having described her dream wedding. The two fantasies are paradigmatic opposites—traditional gender roles on the one hand, followed by a precise inversion of

those roles.

The narrator describes in detail the opening scenes of the graphic novel and the sexual excitement that she experiences in reading them. Vampirella is depicted as a highly sexualized character with full breasts and tiny costumes. However, she is also always in control of all situations she encounters, including both fights and sexual scenarios. The protagonist's favorite sentence illustrates Vampirella's non-traditional sexuality and shows her emancipation from normative gender roles in her free choice of sexual partners: "Ich bin eine emanzipierte Frau und kann schlafen mit wem ich will" 'I am an emancipated woman, and can sleep with whomever I want' (140). In this context, sex is equated with freedom. The narrator not only uses these daydreams for masturbation, but also as an alternative, virtual world to which she can flee and possibly give expression to her wish for strength and self-confidence (Müller 102; Bobrzycki 10). Vampirella embodies, in the protagonist's eyes, an ideal type of femininity, as she is sexy and attractive, making it possible for her to hold power over men and live out her desires: "Vampirella ist echt eine coole Frau. Ich meine, die wartet nicht blöde auf ihren Typen. Da kommt zufällig einer vorbeigaloppiert, und schon schläft Vampirella mit dem" 'Vampirella is a really cool woman. I mean, she is not foolishly waiting for her guy. Just by accident, some guy gallops by, and she sleeps with him right away' (140). The narrator also wants to be desired by men, and at different points she imagines how Vampirella's strength is transferred onto her so that she may punish men who have treated her badly. On the face of it, this is a contradiction, but it is tied together through Vampirella's vision of sexuality as power. Such a merging of Vampirella as a figure of empowerment with her function as a male fantasy foreshadows popfeminist indictments of lacking feminist role models and references the competing discourses of German feminism as represented by figures as polarized as Alice Schwarzer, Verona Feldbusch and Eva Hermann.<sup>8</sup>

However, *Relax* must also be understood as a novel that queers traditional gender roles, expressed in the protagonist's arousal and same-sex desire for Vampirella. Not only does the protagonist see Vampirella as a role model, but she is also sexually attracted to her, conveying a queer desire, in which the narrator simultaneously de-

sires and becomes the comic book heroine. Ultimately, such a pastiche of traditional gender stereotypes and queer desires challenges the gender binary, without however moving beyond it—thereby emphasizing the need for a new understanding of femininity and feminism.

Reading Vampirella's sexual encounters as a source of strength, the narrator aims to channel her energy in order to break free from constricting—albeit partially self-imposed—gender norms. Her strong sex drive can therefore be read as a source of empowerment for the narrator, which is reflected by Chris's discomfort when she exhibits sexual aggression. For the narrator, the performance of sexuality becomes not only a way to establish herself, but also a form of communication with Chris. On this level, though, the strategy fails. For example, inspired by Vampirella, she once shaved her vagina. However, Chris, upon encountering the new style the next morning, demanded that she not shave again (141). What the narrator tried to convey, namely sexual desire and adventurousness, was misread by her partner and therefore failed to communicate the desire that *die Kleine* expressed. Yet Chris's discomfort is also rooted in the fact that her sexuality and performative acts actually *do* communicate not only her desire to please Chris, but also her dissatisfaction with normative gender roles.

In a remarkable parallel between the novel's two sections, the female protagonist opens her narrative with a successful masturbatory fantasy (with Vampirella at its center), which contrasts with Chris's unsuccessful attempt at masturbation in the opening of the first section (11). She also incorporates another figure from the graphic novel into her fantasies, a goddess who at some point becomes both herself and Chris. This ambiguity queers a traditional heterosexual encounter, while at the same time allowing the narrator to assume a position of power. Sexuality, in this fantasy, becomes a means of setting up an identity outside of prescribed normative roles, as it portrays a strong, self-reliant female, independent of male patronage. As a result, the sexuality that is actually performed in *Relax* remains partnerless. Masturbation takes place alone, and thereby fails as a means of interaction or a communication of ideas and personal desires between the narrator and her partner. Yet, through its representation of sexuality, the narrative does suggest alternative

models of identity to the reader, while also forcefully proclaiming the dysfunctionality of heterosexual relationships.

Chris's death at the end of the novel symbolizes the ultimate failure of normative gender roles. While the rock star image he portrays is not precisely the traditional male role of responsible provider, nonetheless it partakes of many elements of normative masculine behavior such as sexual prowess and movement in the public sphere, elements that are implicated in his death of a drug overdose. Wagner reads Chris's death as a potentially moralizing ending in which the thoughtless boyfriend is punished (359). Ullmaier makes an even stronger statement when he proclaims that rather than subvert traditional roles, the ending of *Relax* presents a highly moralistic message: "Daß der Held zum Schluß in einer tränenreichen Szene seine Unersättlichkeit mit einer Überdosis abbüßt, komplettiert als stumpfer, den Voyeur-Spießer zugleich bestätigender wie entlastender Zaunpfahl den Daily-Soap Appeal von dieser Art von Pop & [sic] Literatur" "That the hero does penance for his voracity by suffering from an overdose in a tearful scene at the end completes with a relieving and simultaneously exonerating blunt hint the daily soap-opera appeal of this variety of pop & literature for the bourgeois voyeur" (27). What he seems to overlook with his statement, though, is that in the final instance, Chris's death depicts the ultimate failure of pre-existing gender roles when he dies as a rock star, thereby criticizing normative gender roles and portraying the problematic of an identity crisis that ensues from trying to step outside those norms while still being trapped within them.

Furthermore, taking action in the face of Chris's overdose opens up a way for the female protagonist to explore new forms of identity outside of the gender binary and traditionally subservient female role, as she steps out of her passive stance. In a fusion of *Vampirella* and *mater dolorosa*, the female protagonist attempts to rescue Chris rather than playing the role of damsel in distress. As Hennig von Lange remarks in an interview: "Die Kleine hat immer auf Chris gewartet, und nun muß sie nicht mehr warten. [...] Ich hoffe für sie, daß sie versuchen wird, eben wirklich ihren Weg und nicht wieder den nächsten Kerl zu finden, von dem sie sich erneut abhängig macht" "The little one has always waited for Chris, and now she does not have to wait any longer. I hope for her that she

will try to really go her own way rather than find the next guy for a new co-dependency' (Müller 104). Thus *Relax* ends with the hope that the protagonist will leave behind traditional models of femininity and establish an independent identity according to her own parameters.

Such an ending rebuts what critics view as Hennig von Lange's uncritical stance toward traditional images of women. Thus, the criticism directed at *Relax* as a misogynist or postfeminist text is due at least in part to a misreading of the multiple layers of the text. As I have argued, *Relax* displays a much more differentiated engagement with gender and sexuality than most critics have allowed for so far. Sex and sexual desire are not only discursive strategies within *Popliteratur* but also a ground on which to illustrate and negotiate multiple crises, issues and paradigm shifts.

### III.

The typical break-down of the gender binary in *Popliteratur* novels, as well as the loss of gender as an identity-forming category, has its continuation and corollary within the sexual discourse that *Popliteratur* novels provide. Traditional gender roles change, while at the same time alternatives are not available or are constructed via other categories which are not exclusively gender related, such as music or fashion. Simultaneously, old models are still in place, which causes gender trouble and provokes identity crises. Interactions between individuals become problematic, since the markers that used to categorize people and expected behaviors no longer function. This is even more marked in those cases where gender roles would have had a strong bearing, for example in traditionally gendered interactions like sexual relations.

The discourse of sex within *Popliteratur* unfolds on several levels. On the one hand, sexual relations are incredibly dysfunctional as they break down because of the loss of traditional gender roles. On the other hand, sexual acts become the area in which prominent issues within the life of the *Generation Golf* are negotiated. Sex becomes the ground for such negotiations because it is a highly tangible experience, and at the same time one that everyone shares in some way. Transposing elusive tropes like identity onto a material, corporeal plane offers the possibility of dealing with them in a more

solid, and quite literally, physical way. As seen in the above reading of Hennig von Lange's novel, such issues include, but are not limited to self-perception, interaction with others, and prescribed gender roles and expectations. Due to the predicament constituted by the break-down of conventional gender models and the confusing and confused behavior that results, however, sexuality falls short in its ability to serve as an element of communication or a marker to establish identity parameters. *Popliteratur*, as the literature of, by, and for a generation that has been socialized primarily through pop culture, delivers its observations and critiques in exactly the format representative of its time. Yet, while intercourse provides a detailed discourse within *Popliteratur*, it cannot offer a solution to the multiple crises it represents. *Popliteratur* delivers an insightful reading of the *Generation Golf's* condition, when traditional and stereotypical gender roles for women and men are rejected, even as they are employed as narrative strategies and (unstable) identity markers. This counter-positionality of simultaneously deconstructing and re-inscribing preconceived gender roles illustrates a critical deadlock in conceptualizing gender in contemporary German literature and culture.

*Popliteratur* both partakes of and represents the debate about feminism as it pertains to contemporary discourse. In particular, it exhibits a feminism informed by deconstructivism and poststructuralism, predominantly expressed in Butlerian notions of gender performativity and sexuality as understood by queer theory. In this way, *Popliteratur* anticipates popfeminism's "Kritik von Popkultur mit einem feministischen Instrumentarium" 'critique of pop culture with feminist instruments' (Peglow). Like popfeminism, *Popliteratur* aims to construct new categories for identity. Rather than delivering a more ambiguous and less political style of writing where the differences between the sexes are concerned (Biendarra 231-32), I conclude that *Popliteratur* thus represents gender identity as a fragmented, performed, and assumed quality, which anticipates the theorization of gender within popfeminism.

The connection between *Popliteratur* and popfeminism, then, can be clearly understood in the following light. Where *Popliteratur* illustrates a gender and identity crisis for the *Generation Golf*, popfeminism formulates clear demands and needs. This point is under-

scored by the fact that some authors of *Popliteratur*, such as Hensel, now count themselves among the popfeminists. Today, popfeminism continues to develop beyond the insights of *Popliteratur*, both utilizing and criticizing the differences among first-, second-, and third-wave feminism, as well as the discrepancies between feminist theories and actual, livable positions, in order to imagine a new way of thinking about gender issues and questions of identity at the millennium.

#### Notes

1 The title *Faserland* can be translated in a twofold way: as “babble land” and as the mispronounced or drunkenly pronounced “father land,” calling upon the protagonist’s intoxication as well as Germany’s Nazi past. This and all other translations are my own.

2 This generation includes those born in the early- to mid-1970s in West Germany. The term, which is comparable to “Generation X,” is taken from Illies’s *Generation Golf*, which takes the VW Golf/Rabbit as a generational symbol.

3 In addition to *Faserland*, *Relax*, and *Tomboy*, see also Sibylle Berg’s *Sex II* (1998).

4 *Fräuleinwunder*, a term coined by literary critic Volker Hage in 1999, problematically conflates a generation of highly successful young female authors like Jenny Erpenbeck, Felicitas Hoppe, Zoe Jenny, Juli Zeh and Julia Franck. The term itself not only reflects a patronizing attitude but also suggests ‘wonderment’ towards the accomplishments of the writers. Additionally, it creates a gender divide in the reception of male and female authors of *Popliteratur*, which in turn contradicts the genre’s elaborations on the breakdown of the gender binary.

5 Especially in the mid-1990s, a certain display of homosexuality and androgyny was fashionable and considered attractive in some subcultures (e.g. the techno scene that Chris and his friends are part of).

6 While such a wedding is non-traditional in German culture, it does conform with stereotypes of a rock-’n’-roll lifestyle. In this sense, the imagined wedding could even be seen as a parody. The imagined place, Las Vegas, underlines this illusory quality, given that this city stands not only for weddings, but also for performance, shows, and magic.

7 *Vampirella* debuted in 1969 as a black-and-white comic strip by Frank Frazetta and was published in this format throughout the 1970s. In 1992, the heroine made a revamped comeback as a colored comic. For further details see <[www.vampirella.com](http://www.vampirella.com)>.

8 These three public figures symbolize different positions in the contemporary German debate on feminism. Schwarzer, editor of the women's magazine *Emma* and well known for her *PorNO* 'no porn(ography)' campaign in the 1980s, represents the traditional standpoint of second-wave feminism. Feldbusch, a former *Miss Germany* and current media icon, has adopted a less-than-intelligent bombshell TV persona and turned herself into a household name and shrewd businesswoman, profiting from her sex appeal. Former TV moderator and author Herman represents a new type of conservatism, criticizing second-wave feminism and demanding a new appreciation of traditional norms and gender roles.

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