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## Feminism and Generational Conflicts in Alexa Hennig von Lange's *Relax*, Elke Naters's *Lügen*, and Charlotte Roche's *Feuchtgebiete*

### Abstract

The publication of Charlotte Roche's controversial novel *Feuchtgebiete*, along with a wave of nonfiction popfeminist writings, prompted heated debates in 2008 among different generations of German feminists. Despite their attempts to call attention to historically persistent forms of sexism, popfeminists quite emphatically distanced themselves from Alice Schwarzer, the face of German feminism for over thirty-five years. Yet casting themselves as rebels who break away from Schwarzer's second-wave feminism has necessitated that they suppress affinities and shared blind spots in order to underscore their ostensibly less dogmatic, more fun approach. *Feuchtgebiete*, Alexa Hennig von Lange's *Relax* and Elke Naters's *Lügen* depict generational conflicts in terms of fraught bonds between mothers and daughters, a dynamic which sheds light on these tensions among feminists. This essay highlights the coexistence in each novel of a pop sensibility with aspects of contemporary and historical feminism. If the former feeds highly individual choices and signifying acts, the latter points to a collective identity and social movement. As much as the protagonists experience the chasm between these two poles, they also point to forward-thinking ways of re-conceptualizing feminism.

### Keywords

Charlotte Roche, *Feuchtgebiete*, popfeminist, sexism, Alice Schwarzer, second-wave feminism, Hennig von Lange, *Relax*, Elke Naters, *Lügen*, contemporary feminism, historical feminism, feminism, collective identity

Feminism and Generational Conflicts in Alexa Hennig  
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I.

A mix of censorious ire, considered analysis, and celebratory admiration has characterized both the journalistic and scholarly reception of contemporary German pop novels. Basic questions about pop's political and textual strategies, in particular its ability to critique the status quo effectively, have provided common ground across its variegated reception. A surfeit of recent German volumes on pop have also examined both its contemporary and historical forms, making it possible to compare and contrast a wide variety of subversive tactics and their targets. In *Von Acid nach Adlon und zurück. Eine Reise durch die deutschsprachige Popliteratur* 'From Acid to Adlon and Back Again: A Journey through German-Language Pop Literature,' Johannes Ullmaier underscores pop's frothy brew of youth, everyday, and popular culture; intertwining marketing strategies and surface aesthetics that aim for maximum media presence; and self-conscious attitudes and posturing that may inspire either revolt or affirmation (13-14). Moritz Baßler examines pop's subversive potential in his work *Der deutsche Pop-Roman. Die neuen Archivisten* 'The German Pop-Novel: The New Archivists,' arguing that good pop neither affirms nor challenges the status quo but instead simply plays with the semantic possibilities of a larger cultural archive. Yet if one considers the kinds of gendered variations that often fall outside of official histories—and indeed Baßler's volume and many others feature solely or largely men—it becomes

clear that some writers clearly do have larger aims in mind when they tamper with signifying processes: they seek to expose or even blunt the effects of traditional social divisions.

Gerd Gemünden's study of American popular culture's influence on German and Austrian artists provides a fuller picture, with extended analyses of the writer (and Nobel Prize winner) Elfriede Jelinek (born 1946) and the filmmaker Monika Treut (born 1954). Gemünden examines Jelinek's trenchant critique of the media forms that perpetuate patriarchy and Treut's queer utopia as hedge against traditional, identity-shaping polarities. Both artists provide an important backdrop to contemporary popfeminism in Germany and to pop literature written by women in which protagonists struggle with feminism's varying historical forms. Significantly, Jelinek's and Treut's attention to the arena of porn continues to occupy feminists of all ages in Germany. If Jelinek's novel *Lust* (1989) exposes porn's savagely misogynist social and psychic effects on men and women, Treut's films have often documented the empowering, subversive consequences when women like Annie Sprinkle control porn's *mise-en-scène* and staging.<sup>1</sup> For Jelinek, there is no escape from sexist power structures and their incontrovertible damage; Treut, by contrast, underscores the malleability of power relations even within the most basic subject/object divide of porn, which need not continually reprise male dominance.

Recent pop novels by women, including Alexa Hennig von Lange's *Relax* (1999) and Elke Naters's *Lügen* 'Lies' (1999), as well as Charlotte Roche's controversial *Feuchtgebiete* 'Wetlands' (2008), examine the complicated links between power and capitulation by depicting real and imaginary erotic acts, sometimes painful and humiliating, sometimes pleasurable and empowering for the novels' female protagonists. Whether porn-inspired, homoerotic, or highly idiosyncratic, their sexual poses have striking implications for contemporary gender theory, particularly the work of Judith Butler. In fact, they speak to a blind spot that Butler herself identified in the 1999 preface to the second edition of *Gender Trouble* (1990): "this text does not sufficiently explain performativity in terms of its social, psychic, and corporeal dimensions" (xxiv). The pop novels I analyze below explore warring psychic factions, in particular how female protagonists experience both empowerment and a dimin-

ished selfhood when they strike the pose, thus encoding a dual, conflicted awareness instilled by two generations of feminists. Alice Schwarzer, Germany's most prominent second-wave feminist, continues to underscore the damage done when women capitulate to impossible beauty standards, and more acutely when men consume porn, which generation links to violence against women. Butler-inspired feminists underscore the artificial nature of gender roles, as well as the multiple, shifting discourses that shape our perception of them. Thus what Schwarzer would consider enactments of retrograde feminine poses carry within them the possibility of signifying differently, if not advantageously, if only the historical discourse of second-wave feminists would shift and give way. Yet the conflicted psyches in the novels I examine suggest that these multiple discourses of gender and feminism tend to overlap, not supersede each other, much to the detriment of the women who experience their effects.

## II.

Conflicts between Schwarzer's generation of second-wave feminists and the popfeminism that emerged in recent years reached a head in 2008 with the publication of two texts, Jana Hensel and Elisabeth Raether's *Neue deutsche Mädchen* 'New German Girls' (2008) and Meredith Haaf, Susanne Klingner, and Barbara Streidl's *Wir Alphamädchen. Warum Feminismus das Leben schöner macht* 'We Alpha Girls. Why Feminism Makes Life More Beautiful' (2008). Though both texts explicitly distance themselves from Schwarzer, *Neue Deutsche Mädchen* articulates its critique in a more invidious, at times even mean-spirited manner, suggesting not only discursive differences but also mother/daughter conflicts. Hensel begins her introduction to *Neue Deutsche Mädchen* by describing the basic pleasures of Starbucks coffee, a glass of wine, and a cigarette, conjuring a private domain that counters a global arena of female oppression. She then recalls attending a press conference where Schwarzer gave a speech to mark the thirtieth anniversary of *EMMA*, the feminist magazine that Schwarzer founded in 1977. After finding a seat in the back, Hensel purposely tunes out, at once marginalized and passively antagonistic. She then details her negative responses to an introduction that labels Schwarzer a role model for her campaigns against female oppression under Islam and genital mutilation in

Africa, as well as her attention to the societal causes of eating disorders and the dire circumstances of German prostitutes. Though Schwarzer's feminist politics have long been criticized for collapsing the differences among women in the name of a unified "we," for maligning Muslim men *tout court*, and for unequivocally equating porn and prostitution with oppression, Hensel articulates a more basic complaint, namely that these issues constitute a drama that has nothing to do with her generation's lives, with their need to address how it feels when an affair ends, why women are so insecure, and why they can't trust men to be loving and responsible fathers.

Hensel's attempts to separate popfeminists from their forebears, however, often unwittingly underscore common ground. The glowing terms with which she describes her friendship with Raether—their love at first sight and night of drunken revelry at a Paris café—conjure a sisterhood is powerful brand of female solidarity, but given her critique of Schwarzer one that is strikingly devoid of prescriptive mothers. Ironically, in cultivating an autobiographical voice, Hensel and other popfeminist authors echo the female literary voices who articulated second-wave feminism's challenge to a misogynist status quo in Germany during the 1970s. And as much as they separate themselves from the presumptuous "we" that Schwarzer uses to talk about women's issues, popfeminists speak in their own collective voice, one that no doubt once again represents a generation of white, financially secure, educated women. Though popfeminists acknowledge their limited purview, they hardly seem troubled by it. Overall, what Hensel and other popfeminists intend as a discursive rupture ends up resembling a self-centered and willfully contrary youth in need of psychic, but not actual substantive differentiation from its parent generation.

Against this backdrop, it makes all the more sense to examine literary works whose protagonists quite forcefully experience this chasm. Hennig von Lange's *Relax*, Naters's *Lügen*, and Roche's *Feuchtgebiete* suggest, albeit in highly individual ways, tentative bridges and even forward-thinking ways of re-conceptualizing feminism. In striking a pornographic pose, the protagonist of *Relax* very pointedly caters to the sexual desires of a callous boyfriend who remains mostly absent throughout the novel. His behavior also inspires her daydreams about the militant and even man-hating ten-

dencies with which second-wave feminism has been characterized. If the novel reveals a consciousness raised along distinctly feminist lines, however clichéd, it also shows the protagonist's empowerment and sexual pleasures in playing an insolent vamp inspired by a cartoon character. *Relax* thus combines a younger generation's pop sensibility with the kind of anger that initiates social change. Unlike the smug disdain towards the status quo evident in pop novels by men, *Relax* suggests that unresolved issues of power within feminism create stakes too high for mocking condescension.

*Lügen* conjures imaginary female/female erotic acts which clearly manifest the pleasures of hierarchically defined sexual relations, evident when one of the protagonists dreams of being fed to a lesbian who sexually dominates her. Such fantasies, however, also counter the pain that Naters's protagonist experiences in the deep bonds that characterize her friendship with another woman. The "we" with which second-wave feminism articulated female solidarity in the face of oppression breaks down quite dramatically in the protagonists' hurtful rift and the dichotomous pleasure principle that serves as its salve. But *Lügen* adds a significant layer to this polarity: while one of the girlfriends consciously imitates a variety of feminism's historical consciousness-raising strategies, the other considers her efforts an empty form of posing. Though the wannabe feminist occupies the dominant position, *Lügen* ultimately heals seemingly irreparable splits in a manner that bridges the gap between old- and new-style feminists in forward-thinking, or perhaps utopian ways.

*Feuchtgebiete*, to which I turn first, offers its own graphic rendition of gender politics, though one almost completely stripped of media forms. Indeed, the only time its young female protagonist Helen turns on a television she immediately turns down the sound, creating an isolation that potentially fosters the conditions for a more authentic selfhood. By smearing the surface of her body with its own fluids, she also appears to mock a patriarchally-mandated culture of beauty. Yet Helen adds a sexual component to this body, given that her playful use of its varied effluvia sometimes requires a partner. Even during anal sex, which could be considered the ultimate form of subjugation for a woman, she and her various partners exult in the tastes and smells of their shared bodily substances.

Compared to a scene in which a doctor aggressively penetrates Helen's anus with a metal probe, causing her searing pain, her anal sex practices appear to be surprisingly egalitarian. Yet in preparing for anal sex Helen suffers the consequences of an ill-fated intimate shave, which ultimately lands her in the hospital. An arousing ritual when performed by others, it otherwise becomes a tedious chore in her daily grooming routine and ultimately a damaging one as well. Thus Helen experiences both the joys and pitfalls of stylizing her body, whether in the name of omnipresent patriarchal demands or her own idiosyncratic beauty rituals.

As much as one perceives links to second-wave feminism in this critique of beauty standards, Helen also exhibits a selfhood not wholly amenable to this historical frame. In fact, despite the fact that Roche, who considers herself a feminist, had graced the cover of *EMMA* in 2001, in 2008 she openly sparred with Schwarzer in the German media, criticizing her for forgetting about the "Menschen in der Frau" 'human being within a woman.'<sup>2</sup> Being human, of course, means being both exemplary and flawed. Roche's stance quite explicitly challenges Schwarzer's prescriptions for the exemplary woman in feminist terms, with all the attendant politically correct forms this woman ideally embodies. *Feuchtgebiete* also challenges the contemporary cultural field, particularly as it is imagined in pop novels. Despite Helen's separation from the world of consumer culture, she nonetheless experiences her stylized body in playful terms (particularly when she dabs vaginal secretions behind her ears) that recall pop's forms. This body clearly contrasts, however, with the stylized bodies of male pop protagonists, who consciously drape themselves in the accoutrements of popular culture. If Helen decorates her own surface on her own terms, she nonetheless does so with the same forthright attitude as her male counterparts. Rather than bathing pleasurably in the well of consumer culture, she exults in her own material fluids. In this sense, Helen combines a seventies-style, second-wave-mandated natural body with a contemporary stylized selfhood. Across a longer historical spectrum, Roche's protagonist converts the self-reflective *Innerlichkeit* 'interiority' of German women's novels of the 1970s to an in-your-face *Äußerlichkeit* 'outwardness.' Verena Stefan's autobiographical novel *Häutungen* 'Shedding' (1975) typifies an earlier generation's attempts to slough

off a false consciousness. By comparison, one could dub Roche's novel "Drippings," given the way Helen publicly displays abject substances on the surface of her body.

### III.

*Feuchtgebiete* depicts the barely eighteen-year-old Helen, whose unconventional life experiences make Roche's novel resemble a fringe-variant on the classic coming-of-age genre. Throughout the novel, she retains traces of childhood that get tangled up with the very adult sexuality she otherwise exhibits. Helen not only stylizes her body with its own emissions, she also creates idiosyncratic names for various anatomical parts. Her alternate vocabulary turns the wellsprings of abject substances into natural and sometimes edible forms—she calls her chronic hemorrhoids for instance "Blumenkohl" 'cauliflower'—which in turn counter the cultural mandates that call for their removal. More than a variant on attempts to take back the domain of signification by *écriture féminine* or by popular works like *The Vagina Monologues*, the childlike Helen also exhibits one way of separating from parents: usurping the names that give children the terms with which they experience their bodies.<sup>3</sup> Sometimes her linguistically-styled body parts even talk back, like when she imagines her anus protesting a doctor's rough treatment with a metal probe. Less dramatically, Helen challenges the zealous hygiene which guided her mother's early tending of her genital region. By contrast, Helen asserts "Hygiene wird bei mir kleingeschrieben" 'Hygiene is not important to me' (18). Strikingly, Helen compares scrupulously sanitized public restaurants to rapists, implicitly critiquing her mother's power. All of Helen's elaborate preparations for anal sex, on the other hand, manifest her pleasures in adult sexuality and her control of determining how it will be expressed. She thus vacillates between two extremes: pain, whether physical or imagined, and orgasmic pleasure, which together conjure both a child's helplessness and an adult's defiant sexuality.

More dramatically, controlling the substances that exit and enter her body becomes the symbolic means with which Helen creates an autonomous identity. She cultivates, for instance, avocado pits that she inserts into and removes from her vagina, even bringing them with her to the hospital as she convalesces there. Helen's act resonates in a number of ways. Most obviously, expelling the avoca-

do stones that she so lavishly cares for is a way of giving birth, if not birthing herself. As she asserts: “Näher komme ich an Geburt nicht ran” “This is the closest I’ll get to birth” (40). This process also links Helen to her mother’s reproductive capacities, as well as to the women in her family tree, all of whom suffered from psychological troubles and mental breakdowns, a legacy which her act potentially ends with a symbolic stillbirth. More concretely, she severs ties by having herself sterilized soon after her eighteenth birthday. Helen also imagines a more violent end to her genetic inheritance—a lightning bolt that cracks open the stone and by extension the “Nichtstun” ‘doing nothing’ of her female forebears. This fantasy then translates into Helen’s one violently self-destructive act in the novel: ripping open her post-operative wound and nearly bleeding to death, much as her mother attempted suicide during Helen’s childhood. Yet it also lays the groundwork for her ultimate coming-of-age in the novel’s final pages, one which involves a male nurse who has tended to Helen’s needs in both conventional and unexpected ways.

On the one hand, this nurse maintains his professional equanimity in the face of Helen’s sexual advances, even when they clearly arouse him. In this sense his demeanor conjures an ideal parent/child relationship based on trust and respect. Yet Robin also submits to Helen’s request to photograph her wound, as well as to return the flesh the doctors cut away. He thus sustains her identity in the terms she lays out, which document a loss but also return a piece of self. (Significantly, Helen retains a hazy memory of her mother cutting off her braid and eyelashes.) Abject flesh remains central to her selfhood, here defined in willfully idiosyncratic ways that Helen determines. Neither her mother nor the larger cultural imperatives she enacts will determine the parameters of her selfhood—symbolically or literally. When Helen’s parents never arrive to take her home, she departs with the nurse, thereby ensuring future care and—given the sexual gestures with which she aroused him—continued sexual satisfaction on her own terms. In the largest sense, Helen uses Robin to attach her sexual pleasures to the deep, caring intimacy that her relationship with her mother lacked.

Helen’s dramatic rejection of her mother points in the direction of generational conflicts among feminists and seemingly sides with younger feminists who place a premium on choice via their stylized

look and embrace of pornography. Helen embodies these elements in an extreme, self-centered form. At the same time, given the playful nature with which Helen articulates her sexuality, she appears to eschew forms of sexuality that rely on dominance and submission, which aligns with second-wave feminism's dream of parity between the sexes. But in defining her identity via the antipodes of childhood and adulthood, Helen adds an important element to sexuality, which is not amenable to correction according to such progressive aims. Childhood defines the roots of identity not only in culturally-determined ways, but also in terms of the highly individual ways that humans respond to them. I purposely use the word human, with all its liberal, humanist connotations, because it hints at, more than the cultural programming we associate with the word subject, what I would call the mysteries of identity. To be human implies a selfhood untouched by progress on the feminist front, one that acts in the name of deeply-seated needs rooted in childhood. Second-wave forms of feminism would do well to understand women's choices in psychological terms that often resist change, no matter how revolutionary the battle-cry.

*Relax* and *Lügen* give us their own kind of conflicted protagonists who sometimes blatantly conform to or idiosyncratically enact cultural mandates. Their first-person singular, interior monologues provide a variant of 1970s *Innerlichkeit*, but one that lays false consciousness bare in both banal and egregious forms. Augusta, the protagonist of *Lügen*, meditates on everything under the sun, from Stendahl's *The Red and the Black* to game shows and her close friend Be's hemorrhoids. In *Relax*, a protagonist designated by her boyfriend as *die Kleine* 'the little girl,' proclaims at one point that her self-esteem relies on nail polish. Each woman shows us the lies at the heart of subjectivity and the wellspring of media forms that sustains them. *Relax* often repeats the phrase "that's like in films" or "one knows that from films"; *Lügen* echoes this phrase and also structures much of its narrative around the act of watching or being watched. Both novels' cultural reference points, which include feminist emancipation, contribute to their protagonists' deep neurosis and what, in the case of Augusta, may even be a form of psychosis.

Though *die Kleine* declares that "Männer Emanzen hassen" 'men hate emancipated women' (153) she sometimes drops phrases

like “Befreiung der Frau” ‘liberation of women,’ speaks of hippies and revolution and having spikes all over her body, and imagines her girlfriend Barb’s plastic monsters castrating men. Yet the only concrete political act she contemplates is jumping out a window and sacrificing herself for the “unterdrückten Frau der 90er Jahre” ‘repressed woman of the 1990s’ (264). Suffice it to say that power remains a moving target in *die Kleine*’s confused fantasies. More often *die Kleine* indulges fantasies of a porn star-like comic-book character named Vampirella, picturing herself as a pole-dancer before a male audience that wonders: “Wer ist diese sexy Braut? Man, die will ich ficken!” ‘Who’s this sexy chick? Man I’d like to fuck her!’ (233). Yet in *die Kleine*’s mind, Vampirella turns the tables on men, whom she also imagines whipping and bringing to their knees:

Das sind echt die tiefsten Wünsche und Bedürfnisse jeder Frau: Vamp sein. Die Männer liegen einem zu Füßen und nuckeln an den Vamp-Fussnageln. Ja, so soll es sein. Immer tüchtig Nagellack auf die Füße, und schon bist du Vamp. Naja. Das möchte ich mal erleben, das Chris an meinen Fussnageln knabbert und den Teppich vor lauter Unterwerfung zerfetzt. Ich schwöre es, das wird nie passieren.

These are the deepest wishes and needs of every woman: being the Vamp. Men lie at your feet and suck on your vamp toes. Yes, that’s how it should be. By always carefully painting your toes, you’re a vamp. Oh well. I’d like to experience that sometime, Chris nibbling on my toes and tearing up the carpet in his subjugation. I swear it will never happen. (152)

The power reversal here could hardly be described as feminist, if feminism is defined as the dream of parity and mutual respect between men and women (though it does feel like a fitting response to a boyfriend who treats *die Kleine* badly). Even more important, *die Kleine*’s fantasies play out, in amplified form, the hierarchical conditions at the base of human relations—what one could call the *Realpolitik* missing in feminism’s liberal humanist vision.

*Relax* underscores the roots of power dyads by linking Vampirella to *die Kleine*’s mother. After describing her attraction to Vampirella’s breasts, *die Kleine* recalls a photo of her mother on the beach and also remembers the pleasures of sitting in her lap. Femi-

nism has often looked to mothers as icons of a more caring, nurturing ethic. *Die Kleine's* fantasy, however, is less programmatic: it could signal that female sexuality itself is less fixed and thus more in line with the text's other forms of labile identification. At the same time, the verb "nuckeln" 'sucking' in the above quote looks back towards the earliest bonds in which the mother's power rests on the giving and taking of pleasure. By sometimes dominating Vampirella in her fantasies, *die Kleine* tampers with a bond that forms the roots of adult sexuality; in doing so she gains advantage, satisfying psycho-sexual needs writ large. At the same time, though, precisely in playing up a child's perspective, *Relax* gives us a self that remains stuck in time, unable to progress towards some form of integrated selfhood given the pronounced differences between feminists and cartoon vamps. If performative display in contemporary feminist discourse merely articulates individual needs and choices as well, it hardly enables women to negotiate between such extremes. Instead of understanding the complexities of identity politics, women may end up, like the child/woman *die Kleine*, merely mimicking its catchphrases and strategic exhibitionism.

*Lügen* begins as Augusta watches her friend Be on the street below her window. Her vision transforms the male/female hierarchy of *Relax* to shifting power constellations between two women, articulated in spatial and highly theatrical terms:

Der Mond scheint mir ins Gesicht. Hell wie eine Lampe. Ich höre Geschrei und stehe auf und sehe unten auf der Straße Be stehen und herumschreien. Sie trägt einen gelben Mantel, den ich noch nie an ihr gesehen habe. Sie steht unter der Straßenlaterne, die sie beleuchtet wie ein Scheinwerfer und schreit und rennt wie irre hin und her. Das Wasser spritzt aus den Pfützen. Die Straße ist naß und spiegelt das Licht wider. Das Mondlicht und das der Straßenlaterne. Das sieht aus wie ein Film. Wie *Singing in the rain*, wo Fred Astaire durch die Pfützen tanzt. Sie ist alleine. Ich kann nicht verstehen, was sie schreit. Ich ziehe die Vorhänge zu und lege mich wieder ins Bett und schlafe weiter.

The moon shines in my face. Bright like a lamp. I hear screams and get up and see Be standing down on the street and screaming. She wears a yellow coat that I've never seen on her before. She

stands under a streetlight that shines on her like a spotlight and screams and runs around like a crazy person. The water shoots up from the puddles. The street is wet and reflects the light. The light of the moon and the streetlight. It looks like a film. Like *Singing in the Rain*, where Fred Astaire dances in the puddles. She's alone. I can't understand what she's screaming. I shut the curtains, get back in bed, and go back to sleep. (9)

As in this dream-like vision, Augusta and Be regularly inhabit vertical spaces in the novel that most often place Augusta on top. Augusta's apartment, for instance, is right above Be's. Early in the story Augusta recalls a girlhood moment when she and Be spit on another girl from a second-floor window. (The word *Müll* or garbage appears numerous times in the text, underscoring a psychological view that makes it possible to spit on others and shut the curtains on a screaming friend.) The antithetical extremes of singing and screaming suggest a bipolar vantage point, which may not necessarily belong to the agitated woman in the street. The fact that Augusta confuses Astaire with the actual star of *Singing in the Rain*—Gene Kelly—tips us off to her unreliability as narrator. The scene's theatrical components—streetlights as spotlights, Hollywood-inspired staging, and the closing of curtains, also include, significantly, the slick street as mirroring element. In other words, what Be displays in sensationalistic form may be a piece of Augusta's own tortured psyche. As much as Augusta continually critiques Be's deceitful, self-centered theatrics, she also often inadvertently quotes or mimics her as well, coupling alienation with imitation. If Be is indeed a projection, what does Augusta work through in allowing this piece of her psyche to run free and act out?

As Augusta plays the apartment shut-in to Be as street performer, she witnesses Be play out in her childlike way some highlights of feminism over the last thirty-five years. In order to articulate her momentary *Lebensgefühl* 'sentiment,' Be dyes her hair blonde, which she describes as an "*unglaubliche Erfahrung*" 'unbelievable experience' (31, emphasis in the original). Her label suggests a confused concoction of pop, with its retrograde versions of femininity, and lingering, '68-inspired, empty quotation. More substance comes when Augusta, in quoting Be, underscores her potentially progressive aims, her need to continually change her appearance to irritate

the surrounding world and its static images of women. Yet the more base motives of combining lifestyle with politics become apparent as Augusta observes:

Be, die sich nie um so was gekümmert hat, entwickelt, seitdem sie kurzhaarig ist, eine feministische Ader. Sie liest haufenweise Bücher über Feminismus und *gender* und spricht vom *Postfeminismus* und dass es nicht mehr darum geht, die Weiblichkeit und die Unterdrückung der Frauen anzukämpfen. Vielmehr ginge es heute darum, um den Unterschied der Geschlechter zu wissen und dieses Wissen gezielt einzusetzen und als Waffe zu gebrauchen. So wie Madonna oder Cindy Sherman, sagt sie. Wobei ich nicht ganz verstehe, was Bes Haare mit Madonna zu tun haben sollen. Das sage ich zu Be. Da verdreht sie nur die Augen und sagt, ich hätte gar nichts kapiert, und gibt mir einen Stapel Bücher zu lesen.

Ever since she cut her hair Be has developed a flair for feminism. She reads piles of books about feminism and gender and speaks of post-feminism and that it's no longer about the fight against women's oppression. Today it's much more about knowing the differences between the sexes and using this knowledge strategically and as a weapon. Just like Madonna or Cindy Sherman she says. But I don't know what Be's hair has to do with Madonna. I tell her that. But she just shrugs and says I didn't understand a thing and gives me a pile of books to read. (31-32)

If Be, as Augusta claims, has always changed her appearance, feminist theory now offers the political rationale to continue the charade. Broadly speaking, Be demonstrates how feminist theory that trickles down to the public sphere assumes different contours in the process. Ideally, a woman striking the pose should alienate male audiences with her ironic detachment from an artificially constructed role. But when Augusta asks Be for more particulars, Be demurs and accuses her of getting stuck on theory, not its application in real life. One senses childlike incomprehension standing in the way of effective political gestures, as an ostensibly feminist tactic turns into a venue for regressive narcissism.

Midway through the novel Be moves into a "besetztes Haus" 'squatters' house' with a lesbian lover, Pit, as if to strive for a more

authentic, less culturally-inscribed life. Yet given her theatrical approach to feminism, this phase feels like one more pose. Augusta both recapitulates and subtly mocks Be's dated discourse:

Ihr ganzes bisheriges Leben, mit den Männern und allem, das wäre nur der Weg gewesen, den sie gehen musste, um zu erkennen, was sie wirklich will. Alles das, was sie und ich bisher für Be hielten, war genau das, was sie nicht war und nie sein wollte, aber sie sein musste, um zu erkennen, dass sie das nicht ist. Sie hätte sich vor sich selbst und allen versteckt. Oder so ähnlich.

Her whole previous life, all the men, etc., was just the path she had to take to recognize what she really wanted. Everything that she and I thought was Be was exactly what she wasn't and never wanted to be but had to be in order to recognize it wasn't her. She hid from herself and everyone else. Or something like that. (73)

But Be's old-school feminism—both the discourse itself and her own uses of it—soon reveals its various falsehoods. On the surface, we see how Be's "besetztes Haus" is in reality a conventional, even comfy abode, which renders the search for an outside space naive. And the dream of female solidarity one assumes would be powerfully felt in a lesbian relationship soon gives way to another form of *Realpolitik*, Augusta's assertion that all relationships consist of torturers and torturees.

Like *Relax*, Naters's novel searches for the roots of power dyads in female/female relationships, including the maternal bond. Early in the novel, in a dream that anticipates and perhaps even pre-programs Be's relationship with Pit, Augusta sees herself having sex with a "dicke Lesbe" 'fat lesbian' on a swing, a dream that she records with disgust. Strikingly, soon after her negative reaction, Augusta describes a vaguely erotic, but also maternal scene with Be, one in which her earlier sense of disgust disappears: "Ich lege mich aufs Sofa, und Be deckt mich zu wie ein Kind und streichelt mir über den Kopf. Ich stelle mir vor, wie sie mit der fetten Lesbe über mich herfällt, mit Gummischwänzen überall, und ich schlafe ein." 'I lay down on the sofa and Be tucks me in like a child and strokes my head. I imagine how she and the fat lesbian accost me with dildos all over and I fall asleep' (73). Here and elsewhere in the text, Augusta fantasizes about the pleasure of submission in sexual games. Yet her

choice of Isabella Rossellini as fantasy object later on in the novel suggests as much deep attachments to maternal figures as lesbian desire, if one recalls her naked stroll through suburbia in *Blue Velvet*. Though, as Augusta points out, Rossellini is well known from cosmetics advertising, Augusta also describes a newspaper article in which Rossellini gives tips on washing dishes like her mother, Ingrid Bergman, prompting Augusta to remember how her own mother sometimes invaded her privacy. If lesbian desire allows Augusta to work through a power dyad, it pulls her closer to a mother who nurtures—her fantasy of Rossellini—rather than one who asserts her authority. More specifically, she searches for a mother to cure her perpetual anxiety, which suggests a different dynamic than one based on the giving and taking of pleasure. If lesbian desire pulls her towards women, Augusta's ultimate psychological use of women satisfies another kind of primal need for nurturing, one that assuages psychic pain rather than proffering bodily pleasures.

But the novel moves this utopian ideal further out of reach in its final chapters. The salve for a complicated friendship comes in the form of a film—Douglas Sirk's *Imitation of Life*. The title immediately shifts the story from interiority toward a seemingly more superficial, if not melodramatic place. But the film describes deeply troubled relationships between two sets of mothers and daughters, including one daughter's heartless treatment of a mother who eventually dies. Daughters treating mothers badly provides an absolute reversal of a bond where the mother normally exercises power. As such it provides the novel's most extreme, unpleasant example of hierarchy, one that significantly issues from a child turning the tables to her own advantage. One also finds numerous lies in the film: a daughter who pretends to be white, an actress who does everything necessary to attain fame, and a housekeeper who wants a bombastic funeral. As Augusta emphasizes, they all indulge in the act of "vormachen" 'imitation.' Curiously, though, this fake, imitative medium enables Augusta and Be to mourn deeply—both for Be's recently deceased mother and for their broken friendship—and to find resolution. Conventional genres like melodrama are structured to foster identification, evident when Augusta and Be weep as they watch the weeping women in the film. More importantly, they internalize the film's implicit message about the tragedy of broken bonds

among women. Here imitation leads to potential transformation, defined in the novel's final words when Augusta imagines her future friendship with Be, Pit and Pit's brother, with whom she has begun a relationship: "Dann könnte ich einen Freund haben und zwei Freundinnen, und wir hätten eine Menge Spaß und viel zu lachen, bis an unser Lebensende. Das wäre mal schön." "Then I could have a boyfriend and two girlfriends, and we would have tons of fun and laugh a lot, until death do us part. That would be nice." (192) The novel's final fantasy, evident in subjunctive phrasing throughout and a self-conscious rendering of the Hollywood-style happy ending, holds out the possibility of parity among individuals, whether male or female. Caring relations remain a fiction, but one worth imitating and internalizing, which counters the surface theatrics and narcissistic exhibitionism that otherwise characterize the novel. This particular lie paradoxically heals. If the false mirror traditionally offered by Hollywood brings resolution to Augusta and Be, it retroactively supplements all the various lies that permeate the text. As much as they do damage, they also have the potential to constitute a salutary selfhood.

For the generation of 1968 in Germany, fantasy proffered utopian possibilities for changing the world; in *Relax* and *Lügen* we find something less ambitious but ultimately more authentic, insofar as it acknowledges the fake and psychologically fragmented nature of identity. *Die Kleine's* and Augusta's fantasies consist of antithetical parts: some 1960s fantasies of experience, escape and emancipation, though shrunken down to clichéd form, alongside porn stars and other bald-faced examples of cultural inscription—the various contradictory pieces that may or may not add up to a self, defined in feminist terms. On the one hand, the effect could rightly inspire Be's agitated screaming in the rain on a deserted street, or the other forms of neurosis that characterize both texts. Yet, on the other hand, the ending of *Lügen* suggests that for feminism to move forward towards its goal of gendered parity, it needs fantasies that extend outward and foster collective identification, however optimistically humanist that goal sounds. Neither excessive interiority nor strategic theatrics alone point in the right direction. Given the quirky individuality of Augusta, Be, *die Kleine*, and Helen, we should, on the one hand, relinquish hope for a unified "we" among women; but we

should also consider the possibility that *Lügen* proffers—that individuality and shifting power relations can co-exist with deep bonds and solidarity.

#### Notes

1 Treut's *Female Misbehavior* (1992) documents the lives of four women, including Sprinkle, who invites audience members to view her cervix with a speculum.

2 All translations are my own. *EMMA*'s cover story on Roche highlighted a congenial relationship with Schwarzer and inspired a televised conversation between the two.

3 The nature-based names of body parts that Helen chooses feel vaguely in line with second-wave efforts to help women understand their bodies in more positive terms, to explore them without discomfort, even to peer inside their own vaginas.

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