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Hester Baer and Alexandra Merley Hill, eds. German Women's Writing in the Twenty-First Century. Rochester: Camden House, 2015.

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Abstract

Review of Hester Baer and Alexandra Merley Hill, eds. *German Women's Writing in the Twenty-First Century*. Rochester: Camden House, 2015.

Note: a member of the editorial staff for STTCL is mentioned in this review. This staff member was not involved in the solicitation or preparation of this review.

Keywords

German women's writing, twenty-first century

Hester Baer and Alexandra Merley Hill, eds. *German Women's Writing in the Twenty-First Century*. Rochester: Camden House, 2015. 208 pp.

German Women's Writing in the Twenty-First Century seeks to revitalize discussions of German women's writing in a cultural and literary climate marked by neoliberal capitalism and postfeminist sensibility. The volume opens with an engaging introduction by editors Hester Baer and Alexandra Merley Hill, who offer a concise overview of contemporary German feminisms, the history of women's writing, and intersectional feminist criticism. The nine chapters that follow reveal how contemporary German women writers "grapple with urgent issues in Germany, Europe, and the world: sexuality, politics, labor, race, class, migration, history, globalization, power, violence, identity and agency, all of which intersect with and are shaped by gender" (2-3). Read in concert, the chapters highlight the diversity and richness of German women's writing today.

Necia Chronister's contribution on gender transition in Antje Rávic Strubel's *Kältere Schichten der Luft* (*Colder Layers of Air*, 2007) and Judith Hermann's "Sonja" (1998) examines the dynamic interaction between literary texts and the reader's imagination in the "denaturalization" of gendered bodies. Chronister employs the concepts of interlocution, interpellation, and performative speech acts to examine how these texts thematize gender mutability and the relational quality of gender. Valerie Heffernan and Katherine Stone contribute to scholarship on memory and family narratives. In her study of Katharina Hagena's *Der Geschmack von Apfelkernen* (*The Taste of Apple Seeds*, 2008), Anja Jonuleit's *Herbstvergessene* (*Forgotten Ones of Autumn*, 2010), and Annette Pehnt's *Chronik der Nähe* (*Chronicle of Closeness*, 2012), Heffernan engages the concept of motherhood to explore questions of a female lineage, i.e., the traits and stories mothers pass down (or hide) from daughters. Focusing on the "historia matria" absent from the (dominant) historical narrative, she highlights the particular role of women's writing in making sense of the past as well as strategies used to voice a maternal perspective. Stone presents memoir as a medium of cultural memory and female experiences overlooked in public discourses about the Second World War and the Nazi past. Her focus is on three recent memoirs: *Das endlose Jahr* (*The Endless Year*, 2002) by Gisela Heidenreich; *Stille Post* (*Chinese Whispers*, 2007) by Christina von Braun; and *Schweigen tut weh* (*The Pain of Silence*, 2007) by Alexandra Senfft. Stone examines how in these texts, testimonial objects such as diaries, photographs, and letters mediate female memories excluded from cultural history, such as the experience of Heidenreich's mother in a Lebensborn maternity home, Senfft's "case study" of the transmission of family trauma, and the inherited psychological problems Braun presents as a female reaction to family history.

Chapters by Sheridan Marshall, Lindsay Lawton, and Mihaela Petrescu illuminate diverse facets of religion and gender. Marshall explores how attitudes

towards religion and gender are shaped by recent European history, in particular the Second World War and the Holocaust. Focused on Jewish and Christian conceptions of God, she investigates how novels by Bettina Balàka, Sibylle Berg, Ursula Krechel, and Jenny Erpenbeck represent the significance for successive generations of religious faith and reckoning with God. Marshall illuminates how religious identities and experiences are bound up with gender and how religious beliefs continue to unsettle. Lawton's contribution centers on Muslim women's memoirs. Identifying themes these memoirs share with other women's memoirs, including the family, the body, and labor, Lawton highlights how they "destabilize dominant understandings of these author-narrators as representative of female Muslim victimhood" (98). She also sheds light on the extent to which marketing, production, and promotion have shaped the discourse around Muslim women's memoirs. Petrescu contributes a chapter entitled "Popfeminism, Ethnicity, and Race in Contemporary Germany: Hatice Akyün's Popfeminist Autobiographic Works *Einmal Hans mit scharfer Soße* (2005) and *Ali zum Dessert* (2008)." Through her intersectional analysis, Petrescu shows how these popfeminist texts depart from the dominant discourse of Muslim women in Germany by portraying a strong female identity, employing humor, and drawing on tropes of pop literature in their strategic sampling, remixing, and resignification of ethnic stereotypes.

Carrie Smith-Prei and Maria Stehle develop the concept of awkwardness to interpret the production, consumption, and analysis of popfeminist literary events, which are viewed as a new form of feminist critique. Helene Hegemann's *Axolotl Roadkill* (2010) is viewed as a provocative literary event that produces awkwardness aesthetically and results in awkward political emotions. An analysis of Charlotte Roche's *Feuchtgebiete* (*Wetlands*, 2008) and *Schoßgebete* (*Wrecked*, 2011) exposes the awkwardness resulting from disturbing and disgusting narrative elements produced via the sexual body. The third literary event is Lady Bitch Ray's author-driven awkwardness and *Bitchism*. Smith-Prei and Stehle argue that the awkward intervention of these popfeminist texts "calls for a redefinition of what literature, feminist literature, and, by extension, feminist political writing might be in the twenty-first century" (150). In "The Indictment of Neoliberalism and Communism in the Novels of Katharina Hacker, Nikola Richter, Judith Schalansky, and Julia Schoch," Helga Druxes addresses the convergence of neoliberalism and state socialism, which she locates "in the notion that a person is caught up in a cycle of self-optimization for the sake of an entity that offers no coherent justification for its demands" (155). Druxes identifies a strong literary critique of neoliberalism's high costs, especially for women, on the part of women writers from both East and West Germany. The final chapter by Jill Suzanne Smith compares travel narratives of Juli Zeh and Peter Handke. Unlike Handke, Zeh focuses on the gendered dimension of the Yugoslav wars, namely the rape of thousands of Yugoslav women, and grapples with its representation. Smith theorizes that Zeh rejects

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melodramatic or sensationalist modes of narration to reinstate "the concept of silence as part of an aesthetics of restraint" (190).

German Women's Writing in the Twenty-First Century succeeds in demonstrating the continued relevance of "German women's writing," not least its ability to critique, destabilize, and confound. Shared themes of sexuality, ethnicity, race, class, religion, politics, history, globalization, identity, and agency contribute to the volume's overall cohesion and coherence. A welcome resource for undergraduate and graduate seminars, the volume is also of value for scholarly research on the diverse approaches and authors that constitute the field of German women's writing today.

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