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Sexual-Textual Border-Crossings: Introduction

In her ground-breaking text *Häutungen* of 1975, Verena Stefan wrote of the linguistic difficulty facing those authors wishing to write about “feelings, experiences, eroticism among women” (“empfindungen, erlebnisse, erotik unter frauen”), making it her goal to create a new female-oriented language (already evident in her orthographical choices) that would give female authors in particular a way of approaching and articulating issues of life and intimacy shared by women.¹ Written at the height of the second-wave feminist movement in West Germany, Stefan’s text suggests that those images produced by existing language practices are infused with a kind of masculine authority that is the underpinning of heteronormativity.

However, this formulation merely recreates the very binary thinking that perpetuates those gender dichotomies at the centre of Stefan’s critique. By suggesting a language defined against heterosexuality, Stefan sets up the textual and lingual representation of female same-sex desire as fundamentally always in opposition and therefore in many respects homonormative. In the decades following the publication of *Häutungen*, feminism has gone through several new waves, and the term ‘queer’ has been deployed in an attempt to solve the binary Stefan (re)creates with her project. But, while ‘queer’ is a productive term when it comes to expressing the multiplicity and performativity of same-sex desire, it also risks becoming a catch-all phrase for alternative pop cultures loosely organised around desires of difference.

The essays in this collection wish to move beyond Stefan’s binary, freeing analysis of the portrayal of lesbian experience from such restrictive notions as a feminist language, queer authenticity or patriarchal repression. At the same time, they wish to reinsert aspects of lesbianism into the term ‘queer’, reinvigorating the discussion of specifically female same-sex desire, seeing it also as plural and fragmented, playful and political. The volume investigates how productive exchange – between languages, between media, between cultures, between histories, between desires, between races – informs textual, visual, and cultural depictions of German-language lesbian identity. While *Häutungen* is often celebrated as the first German-language text to take an openly and distinctly feminist approach to the connection between lesbianism or female same-sex desire and language, creative production and identity construction, the essays in this volume identify a historical tradition of

¹ Verena Stefan: *Häutungen*. Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1994, p. 33. Translation are the editors’ own.

sexual-textual border-crossings in the imagery surrounding and informing modern lesbian identity construction. From this perspective, representations of lesbian culture contribute to and subvert notions of both national and sexual identity.

The first section of the volume establishes just such a historical foundation and shows how multiple types of discourses, from the classical to the scientific, find their way into modern configurations of lesbian representations. Going back to the medieval representation of Amazons in myth, Cordula Böcking-Politis argues in “‘mannes manheit, wibes prîs’. Amazons in Rudolf von Ems’ *Alexander*. Challenging Heteronormativity?” that we find here one of the first alternatives to the male-female dichotomy, central not only to medieval thought but also to modern understandings of gender and sex relations. Through an analysis of Rudolf von Ems’ *Alexander* (ca. 1240) and his crossing of classical source texts with medieval German culture, Böcking-Politis shows how Amazons, through their embodiment of a third sex or gender, may provide a bridge to modern constructions of lesbian identity within German-language culture.

Looking at readings of classical literature in the modern period, Rebecca Raham’s intertextuality and inter-genre approach in “Saving Sappho from the Fire. Christa Reinig’s *Die Frau im Brunnen*”, examines Reinig’s use and retelling of Sappho’s poetry and biography in order to create a space within her own work where she could explore political aspects of her own sexuality and literary biography in the GDR and in relation to second-wave feminism. In doing so, Raham shows how the crossing of such textual and historical borders allows for a fluid approach to authorial autobiography that forgoes the trappings of ‘authentic’ lesbian self-representation.

Moving on from the intertwining of historical discourses to create productive spaces of alternative gender identities, Mara Taylor examines the effect of scientific and medial discourses on literary representations in “‘We, too, belong to this group of Krafft-Ebingers!’ Women and Sexological Discourse in *Psychopathia Sexualis* and *Are they Women? Novel about the Third Sex*”. After an extensive reading of writings by nineteenth-century sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing, outlining his views of female homosexuality and female sexual deviancy, Taylor turns to the question of how feminist literature in the form of Aimée Duc’s novel intervenes in sexological discourses, providing deviant female subjects with agency.

The second section turns to the productive interchange between media, specifically the relationship between text and film and the establishment, or indeed undermining, of alternative constellations of female same-sex desire. In her article “Geschwitz Bewitched. The Lesbian Gaze in and after Wedekind”, Caitríona Ní Dhúill looks at representation of female-female networks of desire and intimacy in Frank Wedekind’s *Lulu* plays and in G.W. Pabst’s film version of the same. Ní Dhúill wants to avoid a standard third-sex reading, and argues that an alternative to heterosexist models of desire can already be found in the female-female constellations found in Wedekind’s *Mine-Haha* novella and in Lucile Hadzihalilovic’s film version. Arguing that the inversion model of deviance offered

by Wedekind's *Lulu* provides an insufficient approach to the representation of female same-sex desire, Ní Dhúill suggests a productive reading of alternative (including masochistic) female same-sex desire outside of the heteronormative, essentialist binary.

In "‘I am coming!’ Returning to the Womb in Elfriede Jelinek's *Die Klavierspielerin* and Michael Haneke's Film *La Pianiste*", Tina-Karen Pusse also suggests a different reading of the representation of alternative forms of female same-sex desire, here the eroticised mother-daughter relationship. Pusse examines how Jelinek and Haneke each deconstruct the myth of maternity by analysing in particular the mother-daughter relationship, pornography, and sexual sadomasochism. The article reads alternative desires such as homosexual penetration and masturbation as representative of negative forces usually attributed to patriarchy, concluding that Jelinek, unlike many feminists contemporary to the novel, does not see lesbianism as a utopian space, free from heteronormative paradigms.

The third section of the volume expands these alternative perspectives on female same-sex desire, offering further queer readings of aspects of lesbianism. Leanne Dawson examines another of Jelinek's works in her article "The *Transe* Femme in Elfriede Jelinek's *Krankheit oder Moderne Frauen*". Here she looks at the non-traditional femme-femme relationship, arguing that the lesbian vampire in Jelinek's play should be seen as a *Transe* subject, crossing, as it were, between multiple subject and language positions, thereby breaking, and indeed queering, all categorical binaries. Dawson thus ultimately sees the femme in this play as possessing subversive potential.

Faye Stewart's article "Out and Undercover. The Closeted Detective in Lisa Pei's *Die letzte Stunde*" examines multiple types of closeting and outings in relation to the construction of identity and sexuality in queer detective fiction, paying particular attention to the manner in which the genre of detective fiction itself, in its use of concealing and revealing as a plot device, plays with the structure of the closet. On the basis of Pei's novel, Stewart argues that queer detective fiction utilises sexuality not only as a category of identity for the figures, but also in the production of suspense, surprise, or as a means of misleading the reader. She proves that the closet – inside and out – becomes a productive space for identity constructions, textual representations, and even social power structures.

In "Die frohe Botschaft der Kathrin Schmidt? Transsexuality, Racism, and Feminist Historiography in *Die Gunnar-Lennefsen-Expedition*", Sonja Klocke adds a further important element to the discussion of queer and trans-figures in her analysis of aspects of acceptability, race, and transsexuality. Beginning with an examination of the fantastic, Klocke is able to show how Schmidt's novel reveals the manner in which sexual and racial ambiguity can become a form of social and political resistance within the imagined feminist historiography of the GDR. She argues that the novel uses a fantastical figure, transgressing gender and race, in order to underscore how power is created at the place where coded bodies intersect. The

novel, according to Klocke, thus suggests the possibility of exploding a variety of binaries related to categories of sexuality and identity, and the concomitant possibility of resistance to political and social hegemony.

The final section of the volume looks at sexual-textual border-crossing of a different kind, moving from analysis to pedagogical practice. In “Queer Borderlands. Teaching Monika Treut’s *Jungfrauenmaschine* in the Foreign Language Classroom”, Carrie Smith-Prei looks at pedagogical possibilities in the context of teaching lesbian and queer films in the foreign-language classroom, paying particular attention to the manner in which avant-garde filmmaking practices can be merged with an examination of female same-sex desire, thereby politically and aesthetically re-engaging the term ‘queer’. Smith-Prei sees in Treut’s *Jungfrauenmaschine* a means of accessing and questioning not only the manner in which films portray and subvert notions of identity, genre, nation, and aesthetics, but also the manner in which the classroom itself establishes, perpetuates, and must ultimately dismantle systems of power with a view to engaging in a critical way with the creation of both sexual as well as cultural meaning.