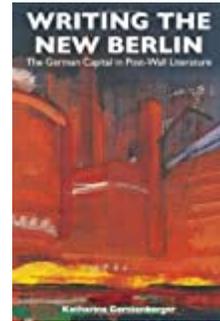




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Defining Diversity: The Literary Renaissance of the New Berlin

Katharina Gerstenberger's lucid, well-organized survey of German-language writing about Berlin is primarily concerned with how fiction published in the period 1990-2005 has responded to the momentous changes in the city that followed 1989. Her analysis is based on three principles: postmodernity in relation to history; globalization and the national; and the search for a new German identity following the end of the postwar period. Gerstenberger describes Berlin as a city of transition in which change itself is a topic of reflection. In a new generation of writers, she detects changing forms of political engagement and greater willingness to embrace popular culture and consumerism. She also observes a change in attitude to the National Socialist period, with writers moving away from commenting upon or demanding change and toward a storytelling or chronicling role. Internationalization and globalization are emerging as major themes in Berlin literature. They relate to issues of national identity, itself influenced by the growing immigrant presence and continuing differences between East and West Germans. Like other scholars, Gerstenberger

observes that post-unification literature has no unified style. It is characterized by great diversity in its aesthetics, politics, and demographic background.

Gerstenberger's survey of new Berlin writing is divided into five chapters: erotic sites and sexual topographies; bodies, borders, and the monsters of Berlin; Jewish Berlin in German and multicultural contexts; East Berlin; and perspectives on the construction at Potsdamer Platz. She provides extensive introductions to each principal theme, providing literary genealogies and historical contexts. Each chapter also concludes with a short summary. The result is a clear analysis of a wide diversity of texts: any repetition that arises is an understandable outcome of the methodical approach. In this comprehensive work of scholarship, the literature of the fifteen-year period following the fall of the Wall to 2005 is scrupulously assembled, contextualized, and analyzed. Gerstenberger handles the interpretation of numerous texts with exemplary clarity. Quotations are provided in the original German and in translation throughout so that the reader can sample all of the many texts presented here.

This study of the city's contemporary writing is embedded in a wealth of scholarly information and critical insight, making it an invaluable reference tool as well as a good read. It also makes a definitive contribution to shaping understanding of how a period of dramatic historical change informed a remarkable renaissance in Berlin writing.

Gerstenberger introduces her literary survey by situating it within scholarship on German literature of the post-Wall period. Important for her presentation is the emphasis by Mathias Harder, Volker Wehdeking, and Andreas Erb on the autonomy of the text from its sociopolitical content, as well as discussions of the centrality of German literature in national identity formation as advocated by author Martin Walser and critic Stephen Brockmann. She draws on Stuart Taberner, who maintains the link between literature and nation but sees both as evolving in relation to changed circumstances: the rebuilding of Berlin as the capital of united Germany is seen as a departure, while the desire to be a "normal" democracy guides the nation and its writers toward new ways of tackling the past and dealing with globalization. Citing Willi Huntemann's volume of essays, *Engagierte Literatur in Wendezeiten* (2003) as an example of German-Polish collaboration, Gerstenberger observes a move toward placing German literature in European and international contexts. She concludes by commenting on the strong association between literature and the German nation and on the reconfiguration of that relationship in 1990s Berlin. Recent scholarship on Berlin has characterized the city as epitomizing the experience of German unification.

A notable literary feature of the post-Wall era has been the call for a great novel of unification, set in Berlin, to dramatize the sweeping changes in the city and the nation. The need for a work like Alfred Döblin's epic *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929), is linked to the wider project of restoring Berlin's reputation as a cosmopolitan metropolis. However, Gerstenberger agrees with the critical consensus that no great Berlin novel has emerged. Günter Grass's epic seven-hundred-page *Ein Weites Feld* (1995), both a Berlin novel and a *Wenderoman*, was considered too laborious for the fast-paced 1990s and met with a mixed critical reception. Institutional support has spawned many short texts by young writers that describe contemporary Berlin from new perspectives. These texts, which do not achieve the desired epic status, tend to stress the city's edginess and attraction to marginal types via narratives about how newcomers and outsiders fare in the city. They draw on a long tra-

dition going back to Döblin in the 1920s and Christopher Isherwood in the 1930s that describes individuals making their way in Berlin. The basis of many of these texts in snapshot impressions enables them to respond to the rapid changes that have characterized post-Wall Berlin. Even so, Gerstenberger maintains that a number of key texts have come to define a "Berlin novel" genre. She includes in it work of the late 1990s written by authors born after 1965 such as Tanja Dückers's *Spielzone* (1999), a novel about young people in the post-Wall city; Thomas Hettche's *Nox* (1995), a sadomasochistic fantasy set on the night the Wall fell in 1989; Tim Staffel's violent dystopia, *Terrordrom* (1998); the linguistic experimentation of Ingo Schramm's *Fitchers Blau* (1996); and Inka Parei's allegory of female survival, *Die Schattenboxerin* (1999). Noteworthy novels written by writers of the generation of '68 include Peter Schneider's *Eduards Heimkehr* (1999) and Uwe Timm's *Johannisnacht* (1996), both of which examine the validity of left-wing politics and offer visions of Berlin as a multicultural metropolis. The search for a Berlin narrative testifies to the continuing attraction of Berlin as a literary subject, even as the "Generation Berlin" concept coined by sociologist Heinz Bude has failed to endure.

The first chapter, "Erotic Sites: Sexual Topographies after the Wall," begins with an epigraph from Katrin Röggla's *Irres Wetter* (2000), which mingles references to sex and the Sony building at Potsdamer Platz, creating an erotic topography of the new city under construction even as it is debunked. Gerstenberger contextualizes Berlin as an erotic space with reference to a literary tradition ranging from Fanny Lewald and Heinrich Heine to Döblin and Irmgard Keun, and, more recently, Christa Wolf and Schneider. She provides examples of contrasting representations of erotic sites in contemporary Berlin literature, citing Thomas Brussig's *Helden wie wir* (1996), in which the fall of the Wall is satirically presented as the consequence of the display of a gigantic male member. In Hettche's *Nox*, violent sexual practices in East and West Berlin are juxtaposed against the breaching of the Wall, while in *Die Schattenboxerin*, the aftermath of the same event is connected by Parei with a story of rape and recovery during a confrontation between the radical Left and the police at a May 1 demonstration in West Berlin a few months earlier. The post-Wall city does not offer new erotic possibilities, but is characterized by the reverberations of the act of sexual violence.

In *Spielzone*, Gerstenberger detects a sympathetic treatment by Dückers of a group of fifteen- to twenty-seven-year-olds who define themselves by rejecting the

political ideals of their parents through cross-dressing and role play. However, she also divines an emotional cost in the apolitical sexual pursuits and fluid identities they espouse. Divided into two parts, *Spielzone* is first set in Neukölln, depicted as depressed and uncongenial to sexuality, but with a more varied demographic than the setting for the second part, Prenzlauer Berg, described as an adventure playground. Gerstenberger then presents a detailed analysis of Christa Schmidt's *Eselsfest* (1999), which examines the influence of the sexual ideologies of the '68ers through a triangular relationship between two men and a younger girl. The Berlin sections of the novel are largely set in the West, reflecting the sexual permissiveness of West Berlin and its literary status as a site of male erotic fulfillment. The same sexual freedoms prevail in united Berlin as in former West Berlin, but without the same sense of a sheltering enclave. Gerstenberger notes that in both works, neighborhoods and landmarks delineate the emotional and political affinities of the principal figures. In conclusion, Gerstenberger draws attention to a significant number of post-Wall texts that investigate how sexuality relates to pleasure, pain, trauma, and death. She sees narratives of sexual violence as representative of the persistence of the city's metaphorical wounds.

Gerstenberger's most unusual chapter, "Bodies and Borders: The Monsters of Berlin," analyzes the literary impact of the rediscovery of the display of deformed fetuses in the Charité Museum, closed after World War II and only reopened in 1998. Recognizably human, the deformed fetuses provoke questions about the boundaries of human existence and the meaning of a return to "normality." The pathological body serves as a departure for political and historical reflection, in addition to offering a range of aesthetic possibilities. Gerstenberger contextualizes the collection by reference to expressionist imagery of the city as a monster devouring human victims and the trope of the city as an organism in city novels by Döblin, Keun, and Martin Beradt. The Charité collection features in a surprising number of recent novels. In *Nox*, the museum serves as a metaphor for German unification as a reawakening of dormant monsters and desires. In *Spielzone*, Benno frees his deformed brother, Leo, from one of the Charité's jars and brings him to the Tiergarten in a replication of reunification that implies the possibility of closure through redemptive ritual. In Wolfgang Herrndorf's *In Pluschgewittern* (2002), as in *Nox*, the Charité is linked with fantasies of torture and violent sexual practices, but in Herrndorf the outcome is not an image of the monstrous, but a sense of

self-disintegration, as normality and pathology converge. Gerstenberger is adamant that the collection does not provide the interpretative key to contemporary Berlin. Instead, she sees the reappearance of the malformed embryos as an instance of the human body and the city holding up an interpretative mirror to one another. The collection of deformities raises provocative questions about Berlin's relationship with the monstrous and provides a challenge to the recent emphasis on normalization.

In chapter 3, Gerstenberger explores Jewish themes and their relation to multicultural contexts in contemporary Berlin literature with specific reference to the Scheunenviertel. The title of the episode, "Multicultural Germans and Jews of Many Cultures: Imagining 'Jewish Berlin,'" itself indicates the tensions in the terrain. Gerstenberger contends—perhaps controversially—that little remains of this former Jewish quarter of the city. Recent stories set in the Scheunenviertel tend to draw on the area's history and an association between the area and crime fiction has developed, as in Waldraut Lewin's *Alter Hund auf drei Beinen* (1995) and Pieke Biermann's *Herzrasen* (1993). The Scheunenviertel emerges as a place of resistance against both German dictatorships and is seen as both non-German and the true Germany. Berlin's Jewish quarter has also inspired a number of magical realist novels, such as Jan Koneffke's *Paul Schatz im Uhrenkasten* (2000), in which the Nazis destroy Jewish-Christian coexistence in the area. Benjamin Stein's *Das Alphabet der Juda Liva* (1995) presents a search for a place that can sustain Jewish identity in post-Wall Europe. Both Stein and Koneffke examine Jewish characters in historical Berlin to explore the choices they make.

Gerstenberger also examines texts that test contemporary, post-Wall Berlin to see whether Jews can be comfortable there, such as Anja Tuckermann's *Die Haut retten* (2000), set in Turkish Kreuzberg between 1992 and 1996. The novel explores tensions in a relationship between a German woman (with a son from a Turkish man) and an American Jewish man, and makes connections between German-Jewish and Turkish-German conflicts. Kreuzberg is portrayed as a sanctuary from neo-Nazi violence, an enclave where problems felt elsewhere in Germany are avoided. Gerstenberger also discusses the work of Wladimir Kaminer in relation to Jewishness and multiculturalism. Kaminer's *Russendisko* (2000), a collection of short prose pieces, describes the Russian immigrants of the 1990s as a diverse, enterprising group. Kaminer is better known as part of Berlin's club scene than for his Jewish roots. Acknowledging ethnic identity as a recurrent theme in his writing, Gerstenberger observes that

his playful approach to performing identity conceals a more serious side and his work can be read as a warning against stereotyping.

Gerstenberger finds Jewish themes in recent Berlin writing to be characterized by great diversity, from the serious to the comic. Joachim Lottmann's *Die Deutsche Einheit* (1999) is a satirical novel about a writer who uses research into a novel about German unity as a pretext for meeting East German women. At the same time, his Jewish friend, Seligmann, exploits German guilt for sexual gratification. The novel challenges taboos in German-Jewish relations and is one of few to feature a German Jew. Barbara Honigmann's *Alles, alles Liebe* (2000) focuses on the relationship between a Jewish woman and her non-Jewish German lover. Although the relationship fails, the novel shows that Jews, however small in number, have their place in the history of the former East German capital. Gerstenberger concludes that German-Jewish relations are an unresolved, but important, element of contemporary German writing about Berlin. She reaffirms multiculturalism and internationalism as mechanisms through which Jews may have a future in Germany, and as an area in which Jews and Jewish writers may make a contribution. The increasing number of Jews in Berlin and signs of a renewal of Jewish culture reveal potential for new identities for Jews in Germany.

In a chapter on East Berlin, Gerstenberger describes the contestation of its urban space. She observes that the East Berlin tradition of defining experience through living conditions persists in the post-unification period and singles out for particular attention Peter Wawerzinek's neglected *Café Komplott* (1998). In the novel, four East Berliners living abroad reminisce about Prenzlauer Berg as a dissident enclave, only to be disgusted by the united Berlin when they return. Comparing *Café Komplott* to Wolfgang Becker's film *Good Bye Lenin!* (2003), Gerstenberger comments on similar themes of authenticity, memory, and mourning, despite differences in tone and intent. She then discusses two novels set in Prenzlauer Berg: Klaus Schlesinger's *Die Sache mit Randow* (1996) and Schramm's *Fichters Blau*. Shifting between March 1990 and May 1945, Schlesinger investigates a 1951 execution in the GDR and examines links between the Nazi era and the early years of the East German regime. Applying techniques of nineteenth-century urban realism, Schlesinger shows how the beginning and end of the GDR were experienced on a particular street. In contrast, *Fichters Blau* is a neo-expressionist evocation of the urban in which the unification of the city leads to fragmentation and loss of purpose rather than unity. The

two principal characters fall in love until they learn from a chance encounter with their father that they are half-siblings. Prenzlauer Berg is portrayed as westernized and commodified, with unwanted East German furniture discarded on the streets: place, even the protagonist's local area, no longer confers identity on the human beings who live there. Gerstenberger also recommends Marlene Streeruwitz's *Majakowskiring* (2000), in which a disjointed and associative inner monologue describes a powerful interplay between fantasy and reality. Representing the former GDR condensed into the detailed description of one room, it is summarized as an allegory of victimization. In this feminist text, the idea of the city as an erotic space is rejected as a male fantasy. Gerstenberger also includes in this chapter a section on remembering the Wall through Sven Regener's *Herr Lehmann* (2001) and Yadva Kara's *Selam Berlin* (2003), in which the fall of the Wall disturbs the daily routine of West Berliners.

The focus on construction at Potsdamer Platz in the fifth chapter provides Gerstenberger with an opportunity to interpret a site that straddles East and West Berlin, as well as its Nazi past and global future. The chapter is contextualized by a discussion on the theme of construction in previous Berlin literature from Theodor Fontane through Döblin and includes a famous reference to the impossibility of finding Potsdamer Platz from Wim Wenders's film, *Der Himmel über Berlin* (1987). She then summarizes Bodo Morshäuser's essay "Bildstadt" (1998) as a critique of the 1990s reinvention of Berlin. Morshäuser laments a lack of coherent planning in the construction of Berlin in the twentieth century and sees its formation as the product of coincidences and transitions. In Inka Bach's short story, "Besetzer" (1997), the history of Potsdamer Platz from the 1920s to the 1990s is entwined with the political struggles of 1980s West Berlin. Gerstenberger also mentions scenes at Potsdamer Platz in the 1990s in Tuckermann's *Die Haut retten* where the area is the setting for a meeting between a German and a German Jew. In the novel, Potsdamer Platz alludes to the significance of the Nazi period for the reshaping of Berlin in the 1990s and becomes a test site for German-Jewish relations. In *Eselsfest*, Schmidt's West Berlin protagonist sees the new architecture at Potsdamer Platz as the capital's heart transplant, serving to signify artificiality and the centrality of the global economy to the reconstruction of the city. Schneider, in *Eduards Heimkehr*, also uses a heart transplant metaphor to imagine the reconstruction of central Berlin as the work of invisible surgeons removing tumors and creating space for new

organs, sinews, and arteries before a new heart is put in place. Nothing less than complete regeneration will bring a place as devastated by history as Potsdamer Platz back to life. In Julia Franck's *Liebesdiener* (1999), disorientation at Potsdamer Platz is personal rather than political, while Ulrike Draesner's *Atmer* (1998) is an experimental prose text that describes a journey ending at Potsdamer Platz as circulation around an indeterminate destination, a floating place whose resistance to interpretation is seen as integral to the city. In a section on historical perspectives, Gerstenberger compares Schneider's novel with Cees Nooteboom's *Allerseelen* (1999) and their use of Potsdamer Platz to reflect on issues of history and identity. Nooteboom presents a search for fresh visual perspectives, while Schneider's emphasis falls on political legacies. Although Gerstenberger reads addressing the Nazi past as crucial to these works, she interprets Schneider's emphasis as based not so much on collective *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* as on personal, individual choices and reflection.

In her conclusion, Gerstenberger conveys a sense that the period of post-Wall Berlin literature is over, as Berlin has been eclipsed in recent years by wider historical and geographical concerns. Gerstenberger observes that questions of history and identity have emerged as particularly important, along with the configuration of Berlin as the place where the influence of the postwar period on the post-Wall era is assessed. Berlin texts by older West German writers often refer to the student movement's effect on German society, but she also notices a trend toward moving beyond the agenda of cultural and political change advocated by the generation of 1968. Younger authors tend to depoliticize identity and to insist on individuality rather than being defined by group membership and shared political struggles. East Berlin is considered to have its own memory and identity politics, and Gerstenberger makes the interesting observation that attention to detail is crucial in texts by East Berlin writers in recalling a city that no longer exists. Unsurprisingly, borders emerge as the most pervasive metaphor in post-Wall texts about Berlin; the city's walled-in past contrasts

with the openness of the present. Openness is portrayed in images of a global economy, international crime, and untrammelled sexuality: the Wall may have gone but borders remain a live issue.

Gerstenberger selects *Eduards Heimkehr* and *Spielzone* as representative Berlin texts of the period embodying different generational and political perspectives: whereas Schneider examines the politics of the 1968 generation in a post-Wall context, DÄ½ckers presents playing with gender and identity as the reaction of a younger generation against political attitudes shaped by the student and feminist movements. Klaus Schlesinger's *Die Sachen mit Randow* is another of Gerstenberger's recommendations for its engagement with the span of GDR history and focus on visual culture. She also highlights a number of innovative texts that transcend the issues of the 1990s aesthetically and politically. These include Zafer Åenocak's *Der Erotomane* (1999), in which eroticism is associated with creativity and identity; *Majakowskiring*, for its stylistic audacity and feminist response to oppression and 1990s Berlin literature; and *Atmer*, for its experimental perspective on the city and the movement of bodies through it. Race, gender, and history remain central concerns of post-Wall literature, but Gerstenberger adds that these issues tend to be addressed through approaches that are neither dogmatic nor apolitical. She concludes that Berlin literature in this period has contributed to a shift away from the novel as the conscience of the nation toward a more flexible engagement with German issues.

Gerstenberger's monograph on new Berlin writing shows great range but inevitably involves choices. It certainly is successful in making the reader excited about the topic. I look forward to further encounters with works as intriguing as *Terrordrom*. If I am prompted to say that Torsten Schulz's *Boxhagener Platz* (2004) and Jana Hensel's memoir *Zonenkinder* (2002) might have been included in the chapter on East Berlin, it is only because Gerstenberger has been so successful in defining new Berlin writing of the post-Wall era.

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