

# Cultivating Feminist Choices

A **FE**mini**STS****CHRIFT** in Honor  
of Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres

Edited by Brigetta M. Abel, Nicole Grewling,  
Beth Ann Muellner, and Helga Thorson





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# Contents

List of Figures	v
Acknowledgements	vii
INTRODUCTION <b>BRIGETTA M. ABEL, NICOLE GREWLING, BETH ANN MUELLNER, AND HELGA THORSON</b>	1
<b>Section 1</b>	<b>Feminist Roots/Routes</b>
CHAPTER 1 <i>Feminist Choices: Contemplating the Intricacies of Feminist Spaces</i> <b>HELGA THORSON</b>	9
CHAPTER 2 <i>Strange Bedfellows: A Married Lesbian's Feminist-Queer Critique of the Homo-Ehe Debates in Germany</i> <b>ALISON GUENTHER-PAL</b>	27
CHAPTER 3 <i>Unboxed: On Media, Memory, and the Material Archive</i> <b>ANGELICA FENNER</b>	53
<b>Section 2</b>	<b>Feminist Scholarship Revisited</b>
CHAPTER 4 <i>On This Occasion, Seven Letters</i> <b>MARTINA S. ANDERSON</b>	73
CHAPTER 5 <i>Ein (unvollständiger) Reisebericht</i> <b>MONIKA MOYRER</b>	97

CHAPTER 6	<i>Mindfulness in Academia: On the Fine Art of Intellectual Labor</i>	113
	<b>BETH ANN MUELLNER</b>	
<b>Section 3 Feminist Collaboration in Action</b>		
CHAPTER 7	<i>Feminist Collaboration: A Conversation</i>	133
	<b>BRIGETTA M. ABEL</b>	
CHAPTER 8	<i>Autogynographically Speaking: A Dialogue on Feminist Friendship</i>	153
	<b>ELIZABETH MITTMAN AND LISA ROETZEL</b>	
CHAPTER 9	<i>Writing that Matters: An E-pistolary Dialogue</i>	175
	<b>ANGELIKA BAMMER AND RUTH-ELLEN BOETCHER JOERES</b>	
<b>Section 4 Feminist Mentoring/Mentoring Feminists</b>		
CHAPTER 10	<i>Feminist Scholar/Activist, Teacher, Mentor, Colleague, Friend</i>	201
	<b>RICK MCCORMICK</b>	
CHAPTER 11	<i>Tea with R.E.</i>	211
	<b>SHAWN C. JARVIS</b>	
CHAPTER 12	<i>A Personal and Intellectual Feminist Journey over Four Decades with Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres</i>	221
	<b>SARAH STEPHENS</b>	
APPENDICES	<b>LIST OF SELECTED BOOK PUBLICATIONS BY RUTH-ELLEN BOETCHER JOERES</b>	229
	<b>LIST OF SELECTED ARTICLES AND BOOK CHAPTERS BY RUTH-ELLEN BOETCHER JOERES</b>	230
	<b>LIST OF DISSERTATIONS SUPERVISED BY RUTH-ELLEN BOETCHER JOERES</b>	234
ABOUT THE EDITORS		237

## List of Figures

All images used with permission

- FIG. 2.1 The author and her partner (l & r center) at their wedding ceremony, August 12, 2018. © William Davis.
- FIG. 4.1 Free books in Kendall Square micro-library kiosk, Cambridge, MA. © 2019 Martina S. Anderson.
- FIG. 4.2 Collage © 2020 Martina S. Anderson. [Collage of letter salutations from Julius to Lilli Seligsohn, 1939–1941; ink stamp from envelope addressed to Lilli Seligsohn, Amsterdam, from Julius Seligsohn, postmarked January 9, 1940, Berlin-Charlottenburg 2; photograph of Lilli Seligsohn, c. 1970].
- FIG. 4.3 “Das Kloster Wienhausen bei Celle, Ansicht des vormaligen Nonnenchors” (Wienhausen Abbey near Celle, view of the former nun’s choir loft). *Archiv für Niedersachsens Kunstgeschichte: eine Darstellung mittelalterlicher Kunstwerke in Niedersachsen und nächster Umgebung*, edited by Hector Wilhelm Heinrich Mithoff, Hannover, 1849–62, <https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/ank> [Public Domain].
- FIG. 4.4 Photograph in photo album (group of girls), 1920s. © 2020 Martina S. Anderson.
- FIG. 4.5 Page from photo album (*Kochstunde, Eßzimmer*/cooking lesson, dining room), 1920s. © 2020 Martina S. Anderson.
- FIG. 4.6 “Fröhliche Sportgruppe” (Joyful sporting group), Winter 1935. Reproduced from the author’s photo collection.
- FIG. 7.1 Dissertation Writing Group, c. 1999. Back row (right to left): Beth Ann Muellner, Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres; front row (right to left): Lorna Sopcak, Brigetta M. Abel, Rebecca Raham, Martina S. Anderson. © Pascale Bos.
- FIG. 8.1 Cover page of “Autobiographical Writings of German Women,” Mittman/Roetzel Course Syllabus, Summer 1987 © Elizabeth Mittman and Lisa Roetzel.

- FIG. 8.2 Excerpt from “Self-Preservation as Political Action,” Mittman/Roetzel unpublished paper, Spring 1986. © Elizabeth Mittman and Lisa Roetzel.
- FIG. 8.3 “Schon wieder in Holland, Rotkäppchen?” (In Holland Again, Little Red Riding Hood?), by Lisa Roetzel, *Women in German Newsletter*, no. 54, March 1991, p. 8.
- FIG. 8.4 “Dancing Through the Minefield,” by Lisa Roetzel, *Women in German Newsletter*, no. 55, August 1991, front cover.
- FIG. 8.5 “Landing Party from the Planet Herstra,” by Lisa Roetzel, *Women in German Newsletter*, no. 57, March 1992, p. 8.
- FIG. 11.1 Shawn Jarvis with Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres at her PhD defense celebration luncheon, Dinkytown in Minneapolis, Minnesota, June 1990. © Shawn Jarvis.
- FIG. 12.1 Sarah Stephens and Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres, MA celebration, June 2008. © Sara Stephens.

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When we decided to compile this *FEMINISTSCHRIFT*, we immediately contacted Ruth-Ellen's colleagues in the Department of German, Nordic, Slavic, and Dutch at the University of Minnesota. Rick McCormick and Arlene Teraoka gave early support by advising us on what Ruth-Ellen's preferences might be for such a project and by helping vet our early ideas. Cathy Parlin provided us with names and addresses of possible contributors—and was her usual generous self in responding to miscellaneous queries during our work. We missed the collaborative and friendly spirit that we experienced in our years in Folwell Hall, and it's nice to know that it endures.

Shawn Jarvis worked with Brian Vetruba at the University of Minnesota's Wilson Library to compile bibliographies of Ruth-Ellen's books and articles, as well as a list of dissertations that she supervised during her time at the University of Minnesota. We are pleased to be able to share those useful lists with you in the appendices to this volume.

Clint Hutzulak at Rayola Creative gave the volume its flair. We appreciate his work on both the cover design and the overall formatting, in both the print and online versions. We are extremely thankful for his patience with our many revisions.

Financial support for this project was provided by the University of Victoria, the College of Wooster, and Macalester College. The support from the College of Wooster came from a stipend that Beth Ann Muellner received after participating in a Faculty College for Women Associate Professors, and it seems fitting that those funds stem from yet another feminist collaboration, this time with Wooster colleagues Jen Bowen and Angie Bos. We are particularly grateful for the book subvention grants from the University of Victoria that made it possible for us to make this book openly accessible under a creative commons license. We firmly believe in building access through open publishing, but we recognize that this type of endeavor costs money; we are pleased we received the funds to publish this work in a way that reflects the collaborative and open spirit of the project.

Inba Kehoe was our editor at the UVic Libraries. Her keen eye and insistence on consistency improved not only the language of this work but also the underpinning ideas. We are grateful for her constructive feedback as well as her patience with us as we considered her comments. We greatly appreciate her willingness to edit the book under a strict timeline with such efficiency, expertise, and attention to detail.

One of the biggest editorial challenges we had as we worked together—first with each other and then with Inba—was how we should name our mentor, Dr. Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres. We know all too well from our work with Ruth-Ellen that women authors are too frequently called by their first names, while men are almost always referred to by their last. So, what should we do in texts that discuss both personal and professional relationships with Ruth-Ellen, that discuss Ruth-Ellen as a mentor, a scholar, and a friend? Do we write as we would speak and call her Ruth-Ellen? Boetcher Joeres? Joeres? We thank Inba for encouraging us to make our text friendlier and easier to read by using the first name; at the same time, we decided that in certain instances, especially when we refer to Ruth-Ellen as a scholar, we would use the name Joeres. Inba's invaluable assistance helped us work through these thorny questions, which are so tied up with language and power, an awareness of which stems from the substance of our earlier work with Ruth-Ellen.

Finally, we want to thank Dr. Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres. Without you, there would be no “we” and none of the connections and relationships that have flourished on the pages here—and, of course, in our lives beyond the pages—would be possible. We are grateful that you gently reminded us time and again that naming is an act of power. We thank you, Dr. Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres, with all your names and titles.



# Introduction

**Brigetta M. Abel, Nicole Grewling,  
Beth Ann Muellner, and Helga Thorson**

**With this book**, we honor and celebrate Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres's impact on feminist German studies, her interventions within the field of scholarly writing, and the influence that her teaching, research, mentoring, and writing have had across generations. A celebratory text to honor someone's scholarly contributions, the genre of a Festschrift was once quite common, especially in the twentieth century, and particularly in the field of German studies. However, Festschrift publications are no longer as prevalent as they used to be, and they often lack the quality that one would expect from other academic publications. Sometimes they consist of a collection of random submissions without a thematic focus and at other times they include a number of articles that had been previously rejected during the academic journal peer-review process. This book, in honor of Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres, marks a new type of Festschrift.

Similar to the traditional Festschrift, *Cultivating Feminist Choices* is built on relationships that have formed over time with the person being celebrated, and indeed this relational aspect of the book lies at its core. The book came into being not only on account of the individual

authors' relationships with Joeres herself, but also through our own relationships with one another and with the world of feminist German studies that opened up to us during our own studies and careers. The importance of these relationships is emphasized and expressed in the actual (and fictional) dialogues in the book; in the personal reflections and nostalgic remembering of working alongside, collaborating with, or studying under the supervision of Joeres; and in our mutual influence upon one another during overlapping years in Folwell Hall on the University of Minnesota's Minneapolis campus, at academic conferences, during personal or professional visits with one another, or on social media. Through the collaborative processes of writing and editing this book, explained in more detail below, our relationships with one another have grown even stronger.

Given that Joeres influenced academia in countless ways—helping pave the way for thoughtful, rigorous feminist scholarship at a time when it was still marginalized and challenging the confines of conventional scholarly writing—the editors of this book want this tribute to break traditional conceptions of a *Festschrift*. Therefore, we, the co-editors and authors of this volume, wanted to produce a *FEMINISTSCHRIFT*: a *Festschrift* that is inherently feminist and one that celebrates Joeres through the coming together of many voices in a collaborative manner. We filled this volume with contributions of various types and lengths, including creative writing, personal reflections, scholarly explorations, reminiscences, and expressions of appreciation, gratitude, and friendship. Our *FEMINISTSCHRIFT* presents a bold reinterpretation of the genre through its infusion of feminist thought and approaches.

The discussions of the feminist *Festschrift* began to take shape at a cash-bar reception at the Women in German conference in 2019. In consultation with Cathy Parlin, the Office and Administrative Services Supervisor in the Department of German, Nordic, Slavic & Dutch at the University of Minnesota, the four co-editors sent out the Call for Papers to former graduate program students and to various colleagues who had worked closely with Joeres. In our call, we emphasized that we wanted this book to be different in both content and form, paying tribute to Joeres's own interventions in the fields of academic writing and feminist German studies. The fourteen authors, including Joeres herself (although without her explicit knowledge that we were assembling this volume), and various additional contributors

underwent a process of writing *differently* and of thinking, writing, editing, and creating knowledge together in a collaborative manner.

The writing that is featured in this book is highly personal, and it represents the first time that many of us have attempted to write in this way. Bringing together the personal and the political, reminiscing about the past while detailing aspirations for the future, and developing our first forays into creative writing has revealed a sense of vulnerability for many of us involved in this endeavor. Yet, at the same time, the collaborative efforts that we underwent in the process of putting this book together have also given us the confidence and the support to try something new. Based on common principles Joeres modeled during our graduate studies, such as accessibility and collaboration, the four co-editors decided that (1) the book should be an open access publication, and (2) that we wanted the authors to work together in a collaborative fashion to shape and edit the four sections of the book. After the co-editors had read and reviewed each of the submissions, the authors of each section peer-reviewed the other pieces from the section and collaboratively wrote the section overview, focusing on affinities across chapters. This process has forged new scholarly (and personal) relationships and reinforced previous connections. As contributor Alison-Guenther-Pal stated in an email exchange,

collaboration seems so fundamental to this project. I just loved the way we all worked together. I'm going to miss [my other section authors] neither of whom I knew well before this, but who are absolutely lovely, generous, freakishly smart people.

This collaboratively feminist process, cultivated and modeled by Joeres, has strengthened and inspired each of us to write in a new way and to produce a Festschrift that challenges the genre in both content and form, while simultaneously celebrating Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres's sizeable contributions and bold interventions to feminist German studies.



Section 1

# Feminist Roots/Routes





**As authors of this section**, we articulate something elemental about the various pathways that lead to feminism, something that sometimes necessitated breaking with social precedents. At the same time, threads of intellectual, moral, and social continuity with the past remain woven into our lives, confirming the legitimacy of autonomous choices in the face of societal circumscriptions of gendered and racialized behavior. Writing in the personal narrative form, as we have, has entailed wrestling with the inherent messiness of the human experience and taking seriously the inchoate affective responses, associative thought processes, and memories that emerge. Invariably, the observations resulting from this iterative process are informed as much by the methodological and social training we acquired in the academy as by the historical era in which our intellectual formations were forged. In the process, we touch upon wider social phenomena such as intersectionality and positionality, but also marriage and kinship as institutions, and the disparate technologies that mediate subjectivities, including higher education as enterprise, apparatus, and social formation.

Helga Thorson's contribution retraces her individual path towards feminist consciousness—one that emerged gradually in her youth—across layers of growing awareness about differentials of power, access, and mobility. In the form of a braided reflection that travels back and forth across time, she weaves together strands of her life while reflecting on the feminist spaces she has inhabited and traversed. The various strands of this piece, such as her expression of solidarity for the Black Lives Matter movement in the summer of 2020, the emerging awareness of her own willful ignorance, and the assumed universality of her own experiences come together in her braided narrative to strengthen her commitment to intersectional and anti-racist feminism.

Alison Guenther-Pal's essay is also an account of intellectual and political commitments as she explores the development of her views on marriage through the combined lenses of intersectional feminism and queer theory. The piece is written in a hybrid genre that alternates between personal narrative and scholarly analysis. This chapter offers a critique of the German movement for same-sex unions by revealing

how the *Homo-Ehe* debates at the last turn of the century abandoned the radical impulses of earlier gay, lesbian, and women's liberation movements to embrace a mainstream, reformist, homonormative, political rhetoric. Bookended instead of braided, she frames her analysis with an intersectional feminist-queer critique of *marriage equality* that on the surface seems at odds with her recent decision to marry.

There is an unruliness to Angelica Fenner's attachment to the past as preserved within the storage cartons she has stowed since graduate school and that inspire her essayistic contribution. Serving no practical purpose in a household where space is at a premium, their value has instead become anamnestic, their contents coveted for the time travel they now enable and the memories thereby conjured. Their unboxing following decades of interment becomes the narrative ground for reflecting on the disorderliness of material existence as both burden and inspiration to the imagination. While appearing an obscure object of autoethnographic exploration (and an obsolete one, in an era of proliferating plastic), they honor a rich legacy of women's writing that has drawn on the domestic sphere as a foil for both self-reflection and social critique. The digital turn of the 1990s and its implications for communication, data storage and retrieval, and preservation, and the concern over media-specific obsolescence extends to the author herself when the battered boxes prompt her to contemplate the limitations of her own memory and her mortality.

Although the chapters in this section differ in content, style, and the way past and present experiences become interwoven, they all illustrate the centrality of feminist roots and routes in the respective authors' lives. As the section's title suggests, our essays explore the varying ways in which the foundations of our feminist praxes have grown stronger but also portable, accompanying us on our individual pathways and serving as vital guideposts particularly when we encounter *ruts*—to continue the alliterations at hand—along the way. It was Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres, as Alison Guenther-Pal recalls in chapter two, who reminded her students that the etymology of the word *radical* stems from the Latin word *radic-* (*radix*) meaning root. In this way, the feminist roots we have developed and cultivated continue to extend their reach, becoming, paradoxically intertwined with those of others along the journeys—our own unique routes—we each have undertaken and continue to navigate.

# Chapter 1

# **Feminist Choices**



# Feminist Choices: Contemplating the Intricacies of Feminist Spaces

## Helga Thorson

University of Victoria

**Helga Thorson** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Germanic and Slavic Studies at the University of Victoria in Canada, on the traditional lands of the Lekwungen peoples. Her research focuses on a diverse range of topics, including modernist German and Austrian literature and culture, Scandinavian studies, gender studies, history of medicine, foreign language pedagogy, and Holocaust studies. She has received numerous teaching awards such as the Faculty of Humanities Teaching Excellence Award at the University of Victoria in 2012; the Excellence in Teaching for Experiential Learning Award at the University of Victoria in 2017; and most recently a 2019 3M National Teaching Award.

What are feminist choices? A choice involves both a process of decision-making and a realization that there is more than one way to act or respond, a variety of options to choose from, even if the choice, in turn, leads to inaction—which is also a choice. But what makes a choice, the act of choosing, *feminist*? For me, feminist choices can be either deliberate or unintentional; they can arise in isolation as well as in collaboration with others, forming from within and around ever-changing feminist spaces, constellations, and coalitions. They often arise out of a sense of injustice and in opposition to patriarchal structures, serving as acts of rebellion, and can likewise be completely subtle and seemingly meaningless. They are part of our everyday lives, as Sara

Ahmed argued, and emerge from ordinary life experiences. Feminist choices are as much about making choices from a feminist point of view as they are about navigating the world as a feminist.

While reflecting on feminist choices, including my own, this chapter should not be viewed as an uncritical promotion of Choice Feminism, a form of feminism that emerged from third-wave feminist debates of the previous decade that claim that any decision a woman makes is empowering and justifiable, whether it has to do with employment, childbirth and child rearing, sexual practices, or one's personal lifestyle. Rather, my reflections in this chapter aim to critique notions of individual agency that neglect to acknowledge and understand systemic forms of oppression. Not all choices are available to everyone in the same way, and the same decision could elicit completely different responses and results in diverse contexts.

While I agree that there is no single or right way to live a feminist life and that each individual may choose to forge a different path, I also acknowledge the deep inequities in the societies in which we live; these inequities must not go unnoticed because they often prevent access to certain paths and decision-making processes. Forms of systemic racism, xenophobia, classism, ageism, ableism, sizeism, antisemitism,<sup>1</sup> anti-Muslim, anti-trans, white supremacy, and many other forms of societal prejudices including heteropatriarchy intersect in multiple ways to shape the choices we may and can make. These systems of oppression not only limit access to decision-making processes, but also elicit different responses depending on the situation. In one context, a decision could lead to gratification, comfort, fulfillment, and personal enjoyment; in another context the same decision could lead to confrontation, physical violence, and even murder.

At a time when racist and antisemitic hate crimes are increasing, Indigenous women in Canada are continually reported as missing and murdered, Black trans women are attacked and killed at extremely high rates, and Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and other people of color face violence and murder at the hands of the police,<sup>2</sup> it is important to

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1 I have chosen to spell "antisemitism" without the hyphen and capital "s" in order to emphasize that the word implies hatred, hostility, or prejudice against Jews rather than against speakers of Semitic languages in general.

2 See, for example, reports on hate crime statistics in Canada (Statistics Canada) and the United States (Federal Bureau of Investigation), as well as the Human Rights Campaign's list of transgender and gender-nonconforming people in the United States. The final report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls has also

recognize the potential of intersectional and anti-racist feminism to bring about change. As a result, feminism involves not only confronting the barriers that preclude people from having access to various types of choices, but also attempting to reduce the harm that arises out of deeply ingrained prejudices and systematic forms of oppression. In this way, feminism not only includes the right to individual agency and life choices, but is also a form of political mobilization, “a collective force for change” (Thwaites 59). In making feminist choices, we cannot lose sight of the political or be afraid of it (Ferguson 252). In the wake of the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Chantelle Moore, and so many others by police in the United States (us), Canada, and other parts of the world, and in light of the protests in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, feminists and feminist organizations today must work harder to engage in anti-racist activism. After the growing awareness of police violence in the summer of 2020 (which, for many, was not anything new) and the right-wing white supremacist terror that came to the fore at the start of 2021, feminist choices are not just about making lifestyle choices from a feminist point of view or navigating the world as a feminist, they are a call to action. Feminism involves working to dismantle systems of oppression, white supremacy, and white privilege.



A braided essay weaves together different strands to tell a story, intertwining separate narrative voices, stories, or themes. In a meeting in my office a couple of years ago, a graduate student told me about her plans to write a braided narrative and equated it with the act of baking challah bread. For her, the kneading of the dough, separating it into parts, and braiding the strands together was personal, contemplative, physical, artistic, and likely also spiritual.

For me, the act of braiding reminds me of the many times I’ve had my hair braided, whether it was for a regular day at school as a child, to get

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documented the violence faced by Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit people in Canada. Since 2015, the *Washington Post* has kept a log of police shootings in the us (“Fatal Force”), demonstrating that Black and Latinx Americans are killed at a disproportionately higher rate.

my hair out of my face before a sporting event, or for a special occasion such as a birth of a child. For me, having someone braid my hair is relaxing, and besides those sessions as a child where I would scream because of the many snarls that had to be combed through first, getting my hair braided was, and typically still is, a fun, soothing, and entertaining event. For me, these hair-braiding sessions represent a feminist space where my sisters and their friends would get together, listen to music, and talk, enjoying the moment while contemplating the world. They were times of storytelling, joking around, and life counselling.

In her memoir *Still Alive*, Ruth Klüger discusses gendered memory as a form of witchcraft and sets up a feminist space around a large cauldron in a kitchen. She writes:

If I succeed, together with my readers—and perhaps a few men will join us in the kitchen—we could exchange magic formulas like favorite recipes and season to taste the marinade which the old stories and histories offer us, in as much comfort as our witches' kitchen provides. It won't get too cozy, don't worry: where we stir our cauldron, there will be cold and hot currents from half-open windows, unhinged doors, and earthquake-prone walls. (69)

Memory work can be an uncomfortable and difficult process, and, in Klüger's case, by retelling her Holocaust experiences through a feminist lens, she contributes to how and what we, as a society, remember and the ways in which this past informs the present and the future. She invites us to remember together in this feminist space, to listen and react across contexts and generations, and to find strength through those who have come together before us, conjuring up ghosts of the past around the witch's brew with magic formulas and special ingredients and herbs.



I started graduate school at the University of Minnesota in the fall of 1987. It was the time when debates around the literary canon were raging. When I entered the MA program, students were required to read and discuss a list of German-language classics (with a few texts by white

women writers thrown in) about which we would be tested by the end of our studies. However, by the time I finished my Masters degree the reading list and corresponding exam had been eliminated as a masters program requirement. Feminism and multiculturalism were challenging traditional notions of *great* works of literature while cultural studies and New Historicism were re-defining the boundaries of traditional literature departments. My years in graduate school coincided with a time of previously unimaginable political transformations that included the fall of the wall in Germany and the end of Apartheid in South Africa, the spread of the AIDS epidemic, the development of the world wide web, and changing notions of sex, gender, and sexuality.

Our classes were filled with discussions of postmodernism, new ways of thinking about gender, including through the lens of performativity as articulated by Judith Butler, and emerging ideas about the importance of “interlocking systems of oppressions,” as described by the Combahee River Collective in 1977, and intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1989 and brought to the fore through the work of scholars such as Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldúa, Patricia Hill Collins, and many others. My advisor, Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres, encouraged me to work in an interdisciplinary fashion with a range of prominent feminists across campus, such as M. J. Maynes in History, Naomi Scheman in Philosophy, and Jacqueline Zita in Women’s Studies. Besides many courses on women writers with Joeres, I was also fortunate to have taken courses with a wide range of feminist scholars within the Department of German, as well as the Department of Scandinavian Languages and Literatures before the two departments merged, including Rick McCormick, Arlene Teraoka, Heidrun Suhr, Karin Sanders, and Monika Žagar.

Working together, professors and graduate students created feminist spaces of inquiry in these courses, challenging notions of sex, gender, and sexuality, and exploring the intersections of these categories with race, class, and other markers of identity. Through Joeres,<sup>3</sup> I became acquainted with a long history of German women writers in German-speaking countries and regions including Bettina von Arnim, Karoline

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<sup>3</sup> To this day, I recall and am still influenced by some of the comments or observations that Ruth-Ellen made in class, such as the importance of Freud’s use of footnotes in subsequent editions of his studies to reflect on, re-visit, and reshape his earlier writing or the question as to why we most often refer to Goethe and Schiller by their last names but female writers such as Bettina von Arnim or Christa Wolf by their first names. Now every time I write about Ruth-Ellen, I ask myself what name I should write and why I would do it that way.

Günderrode, Fanny Lewald, Louise Otto-Peters, Rahel Varnhagen, Klara Zetkin, and of course Hedwig Dohm. In these courses we stirred the cauldron of gendered memory—not to conjure up ghosts of the Holocaust as described by Ruth Klüger, but to expand literary history and to reclaim and appreciate literature that had been seemingly overlooked or more accurately, willfully ignored.

At this time, I became involved in the Coalition of Women in German (WiG). Thanks to Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres, Rick McCormick, Ilze Mueller, Liz Mittman, Lisa Roetzel, and the other Minnesota WiGgies, the WiG conference was held in Minnesota for a three-year period from 1988–1990. Here, the feminist spaces of inquiry I had enjoyed during my coursework expanded in a whole new way. I was introduced to participatory feminist decision-making processes; I got to meet feminist scholars whose articles we had read in our classes; I was exposed to a range of guest authors and filmmakers in those years such as Helga Königsdorf, Angela Krauss, Waldtraut Lewin, Deborah Lefkowitz, Ruth Klüger, Ika Hügel-Marshall, and many others; and I partook in a myriad of conversations during the conference sessions, at meals, and out in nature. Julie Klassen, a professor at Carleton College, encouraged many graduate students at the University of Minnesota to get involved with the WiG newsletter that was assembled and published under her supervision at that time. Soon thereafter I served as a graduate student representative on the WiG steering committee. The feminist networks that came together through WiG created a community that influenced my personal and academic growth in significant ways.



“We acknowledge with respect the Lekwungen people on whose traditional territory the University of Victoria stands and the Songhees, Esquimalt and wsÁNEĆ peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.” This land acknowledgement is typically recited at public events at the University of Victoria to recognize the history of the place, the relationship between Indigenous Peoples and the land, water, and sky that surrounds us, and to be reminded of the legacies of colonialism. It is a way to pay respect to the Indigenous Peoples in Canada and a small, but important, step in the broader movement towards

reconciliation. But land acknowledgements are not enough. As both the *Final Reports of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* and the *National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls* proclaim, there are a number of Calls to Action and Calls for Justice that must be addressed as we work towards creating a more just future.

During my childhood and well into my graduate studies, I knew very little about the Dakota (Sioux) and Ojibwa (Anishinaabe or Chippewa) peoples who lived near the “sky-tinted water”<sup>4</sup> around the Minnesota River. I knew much more about the *pioneers*, the early European settler colonialists, and grew up reading books like the *Little House* series and *Caddie Woodlawn* that were lying around the house. Only more recently, after emigrating to Canada, did I begin to reflect on the gaps in my own knowledge about the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas and my own willful ignorance (see Smith and Thorson, 352–56). As a white woman, I had never heard anyone declare that they grew up hating white people until I attended the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings in Victoria in April 2012, and then I began to understand why.

I moved to Canada in the summer of 2005 shortly after receiving tenure at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. The move, as I understood it at the time, would most likely mean the end of my career as an associate professor of German studies. Yet, after running a successful program with my Swiss colleague, earning tenure, and receiving promotion, I determined that there was more to life than one’s profession. I was also not happy with the direction the US was heading at the time nor was I pleased with the many school visits I had undertaken as my older daughter was getting close to starting elementary school. Several things deeply disturbed me at the time: capital punishment, gun ownership, religious fanaticism, and a lack of investment in the infrastructure supporting the common good (including education), among others. On a whim, my spouse and I applied to become permanent residents of Canada. A couple of years later, we found out that our applications had been accepted. Was it brave or foolish of us to leave our university positions and move to Canada with two young children and no jobs in hand?

Once the choice was made, I had to notify the university that I was leaving, giving enough lead time so that they could hire a replacement, and also start sharing the news with family and friends. Telling your

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4 The word “Minnesota” is derived from the Dakota Sioux name for the Minnesota River, which can be translated as “sky-tinted water.”

*Doktormutter* that you are most likely leaving the profession is not an easy thing to do. I was nervous about it, especially because I still felt extremely lucky to have gotten a tenure-track position right out of graduate school. With a mixture of both excitement and dread, I sent an email to Ruth-Ellen. Shortly thereafter she wrote a long, heartfelt, and moving email about how delighted she was to hear the news.

I think back to this time and ponder the extent to which this move to Canada was a feminist choice, a political act of rebellion, or a mid-life crisis. Most likely all three strands contributed a significant part to the decision-making process. The choice was informed by strong feminist values, political events such as the Iraq war and the revelations of torture and prisoner abuse in the Abu Ghraib prison, and a mid-life realization that I wanted something different for my children. Clearly, the network of feminists, friends, and feminist friends that surrounded me at the time made the decision to take this risk that much easier, and Ruth-Ellen's joy and excitement meant so much.

Among the texts that informed my decision to move to Canada in 2005 were also Victor Klemperer's diaries of the Nazi years published in two volumes. Reading Klemperer's entries, I realized how gradually things can change—bit by bit so that nobody feels the need to protest—yet, ironically, how rapid these changes can be. Reading his reflections on everyday life in Nazi Germany made me realize how vulnerable democracy is, how easily human rights can be abandoned, and how destructive and cruel human beings can be towards one another. In the fifteen years since I left the US, so much has changed, and the speed has been simultaneously gradual and rapid in recent years.



I was never really good at braiding my own hair. If I did braid my hair, it was either in two basic braids, one on each side, or one large braid down the back. Sometimes I would leave my hair down and put in one or two small braids in the front in order to get the hair out of my face. My sisters knew how to French braid, but I was never talented enough to do it well myself. I loved it when they would braid my hair. They would always do a much better job than I could do myself.

Little did I know that what we in my family considered braiding wasn't the only way of doing it. During high school track and field prac-

tices and meets, we would sometimes braid each other's hair in the locker room or on the school bus. Some of my teammates could braid really well. In our school we had several students who were part of the "A Better Chance" (ABC) program, highly talented Black girls who were chosen to attend our small-town school from *far-away* places like Milwaukee and Chicago on account of their leadership potential. A couple of them were on the track team and would sometimes braid my hair. They could make the braid stick out or tuck in and could also braid with four or more strands instead of three. For me, these locker room experiences taught me that the knowledge and way of doing things I had grown accustomed to in my family weren't the only possibilities.<sup>5</sup>

I learned this lesson in my first years living in Little Rock as well. After working on a project with a group on campus called TEAMS, an acronym for a program called Teaching Enhancements Affecting Minority Students that was designed to help graduate students of color succeed at the university, I was invited to a 70s disco night organized by the group. I was pretty confident I knew what I was getting into, having grown up in the 1970s and regularly attending the weekly teen disco night with my friends every summer. I knew disco, or so I thought. As the evening progressed, I realized that I only recognized a few songs here or there, namely, the Motown classics that had made it to the Top 40 list. It struck me again that my childhood experiences were not *universal*, and that my white-centered, middle-class Minnesota upbringing was indeed quite limited.

Thinking back on feminist spaces, I now recognize that the spaces I created and that I inhabited were also exclusionary without me even realizing it. While we seemed to have fun in the locker room, on the school bus, and at track meets, I never invited the ABC students to come over or to hang out outside of school or track. Drawing on "the

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5 From DoVeanna S. Fulton's *Speaking Power: Black Feminist Orality in Women's Narratives of Slavery* (2006) to Emma Dabiri's *Don't Touch My Hair* (2019) as well as the work of many other Black scholars on this topic, the importance of black braided hair as well as the cultural transmission that occurs during hair-braiding sessions themselves have been well documented. The oral traditions passed on through the process of braiding hair, or what Nadia Prendergast has termed a "pedagogy of learning" (122), are moments of transmission and dialogue that are significant for understanding history and for negotiating life's current challenges and demands. It is during these hair-braiding sessions, which in Prendergast's own experience occurred between mother and daughter in different locations and contexts, that the individuals involved not only work through the entanglement of hair but also "the entanglement of their lives and share the care and attention they give to their struggle to survive as Black women" (122).

epistemology of ignorance” discussed by Linda Martín Alcoff and others, I see that the choices I made at the time perpetuated my willful ignorance, even though I was not aware of it then. In a blog written in February 2016, almost nine months before the US presidential election, Alcoff wrote:

It’s not just that folks are not knowledgeable. It is that their lack of knowledge is the product of some concerted effort, a conscious choice or, in actuality, a series of choices. Certain news articles, or news sources, are avoided, certain college courses are kept away from, certain kinds of people are never asked for their opinion on the news of the day. The boundaries of the bubble of ignorance are monitored, protected, even nurtured as a positive good. (Alcoff, para. 5)

Like my own high school experiences, second-wave feminist spaces also had the tendency to be willfully ignorant, even when feminism prided itself on being inclusive. To a certain extent, white, middle-class feminism at that time still believed in its own universality—but that was changing too.

White feminists’ attempts to promote multiculturalism and to celebrate diversity did not necessarily translate into spaces that were welcoming for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. In the words of Maile Arvin, Eve Tuck, and Angie Morrill:

The project of inclusion can serve to control and absorb dissent rather than allow institutions like feminism and the nation-state to be radically transformed by differing perspectives and goals. (17)

Inclusion in and of itself is not enough; feminism must interrogate and transform the very spaces that it creates.



In the introduction to their edited book *The Future of Scholarly Writing: Critical Interventions*, Angelika Bammer and Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres discussed the importance of “treating *how* we write with the same

intellectual seriousness as *what* we write” (2, emphasis theirs). They called for, among other things, greater accessibility in academic writing and argued that “*matters of form*” are actually “*matters of content*” (2, emphasis theirs). The book began as a conversation between the two editors, first in email correspondences and phone calls and then in a distilled version that entailed a staged reading of the essence of their dialogue at the 2007 WiG conference (24).<sup>6</sup>

I learned from Ruth-Ellen that it was okay to do things differently. There was nothing wrong with wearing jeans to an academic conference, with challenging academic traditions and trying something new, and with questioning disciplinary boundaries and talking across contexts. In so much of her work, including co-editing *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* and the *Women in German Yearbook*, she showcased the value of collaboration, accessibility, and interdisciplinarity.

In the courses she taught or co-taught, Ruth-Ellen demonstrated that learning was a dialogical process and allowed ample time for small group and class discussions. The graduate students built strong relationships with one another both inside and outside the classroom, as well as with the authors and the theorists under discussion. Ruth-Ellen taught us that learning, as modeled in her courses, is not solely abstract and analytical but also personal and relational.

I try to replicate this teaching philosophy with my students. In my experience, rigorous scholarly examination is most beneficial when it goes hand in hand with affective and dialogical learning. I too have come to value collaborative research and learning and am at my happiest when I work with colleagues, students, and community members from diverse backgrounds in an interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary way. Through these endeavors, I have come to understand that the processes of respectful listening, dialogue, and relationship building are an essential part of fruitful research collaboration and that we have much to learn from one another. For example, the article I co-authored together with Dawn Smith on building transdisciplinary relationships between German studies and Indigenous studies as well as a current research grant with a team of colleagues at the University of Victoria have shown me that these collaborations are not solely about the resulting publications. Working on these collaborative projects has taught me the value of a process-oriented approach centered on

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<sup>6</sup> A revised written version of their WiG conference presentation, published for the first time, can be found in Chapter 9 of this book.

relationship building. In fact, my colleagues and I spent the entire first year of a three-year grant cycle taking the time to get to know each other over regularly scheduled dinners and learning about each other's priorities, goals, and perspectives. In addition, we followed local Indigenous protocols such as smudging and drumming to prepare for our meetings.<sup>7</sup> Besides fostering trust within the group, this collaboration served to cultivate anti-racist and decolonial feminist spaces across campus.

Thinking back to my own childhood, to the comfort of getting my hair braided and the realization that so much more was going on in these sessions than what was happening to my hair, I wonder if the braiding metaphor could be extended to community-building practices in general. Braiding bread, braiding hair, braiding baskets, braiding sweetgrass,<sup>8</sup> and braiding stories or memories—all these activities have a complicated history of tradition, resistance, and decolonial knowledge keeping. In solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement, I hope to do what I can to unlearn the myth of the universality of white feminism, to recognize my own white, middle-class privilege, and to work collaboratively to dismantle systems of oppression in academia, in professional organizations such as WiG, and in the communities in which I live and work. In my mind, feminism today needs to be firmly grounded in anti-racist activism.

I realize that having the opportunity to move to Canada in 2005 was not a choice that everyone could make, and that my white, middle-class, privileged background guided the process and made my integration here that much easier. After reckoning with the likelihood that I was giving up my profession when I moved to Canada, I was fortunate to be hired into an academic position in the Department of Germanic and Slavic Studies at the University of Victoria three years after my arrival. One of the first people with whom I shared the news was Ruth-Ellen and, four years later, she was also one of the first to hear that I had received tenure (for the second time) as well. She was also one of the

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7 This grant project on historical injustices and current realities was funded by the President's Strategic Framework Impact Fund at the University of Victoria in 2019. At this point in the project, we have seventeen members from a wide range of disciplines, over a third of whom are Indigenous scholars. During our final meeting of the first year, we agreed that our research would focus on examining the history and legacy of historical injustices at the University of Victoria itself.

8 See, for example, the book *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* by Robin Wall Kimmerer.

first to congratulate me when I was elected Vice-President (and President-Elect) of WiG in 2018. As a mentor and friend, Ruth-Ellen has always been supportive of my work as a teacher, scholar, and feminist activist and has rejoiced in my life choices—even when they deviated from the *usual* academic career trajectory.

Feminist spaces are the places where we support and encourage one another, where we can become vulnerable as we go outside our comfort zones and see the world in a new light, where we build relationships, collaborate, and do things differently. These spaces help us come together, organize, take a political stance, fight against injustice, laugh, have fun, get angry, theorize, celebrate, reflect, and reassure one another. They are where we can braid together different strands either in a tactile sense or through language. Feminist spaces allow us to gather together and stir the cauldron of memory. This FEMINIST-SCHRIFT is a place to reflect on feminist spaces and the feminists who have helped build them. As a way of closing, I turn to the words of Angelika Bammer and Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres: “We make and unmake worlds in language and define relationships among ourselves in words” (1).

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Chapter 2

# Strange Bedfellows



# Strange Bedfellows: A Married Lesbian's Feminist-Queer Critique of the *Homo-Ehe* Debates in Germany

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Like many little girls—even queer ones—my best friend and I loved to play wedding. Our version featured the Osmonds. Whoever drew the short straw had to play Donny (or sometimes Jimmy) in this weirdly incestuous, gender-queer ceremony. The prized role was that of Marie, because she got to wear an ostentatious white and gold brocade robe

flanked with ostrich feathers that my grandmother had secreted away from the donations to the celebrity thrift store where she volunteered. As is the case with many children's games, ours represented ritual re-enactments of the patriarchal socialization to which girls in the West are subjected. At the same time, though, this was also a way for us to make sense of normative family structures, compulsory heterosexuality and monogamy, and traditional gender roles, none of which were consistently reflected in our immediate environments. As I reflect upon these fantasmatic childhood rehearsals of the heteronormative life course, I recognize them as the origins of my scholarly and personal engagement with marriage—except that now the theatrical has developed into a critique comprised of two, much later, formative epistemological turns in my intellectual development: intersectional feminism and queer theory.

By the time I got to college in the mid-1980s and came out as a feminist, I understood that marriage is an institution designed not only to maintain male supremacy and control women's sexuality, but is also inseparable from the racist and settler-colonialist foundations of the United States (us). Kinship under capitalism turns women and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) into property, whereby women are trafficked from one man to another and the familial bonds between enslaved and colonized peoples are disrupted, disallowed, or destroyed. The fiction of patrilineal bloodlines perpetuates monogamy, and patriarchal family structures ensure that wealth continues to be passed disproportionately into white hands over generations. As a way of instrumentalizing heterosexuality, marriage safeguards paternity and eschews non-reproductive pleasures, most especially those between women. With such an oppressive history, it was no wonder that political organizing around same-sex marriage was not seriously on feminist or LGB<sup>1</sup> movement agendas at the time. Not only was marrying not of interest to me personally or an issue to which I wished to devote political energy, as a lesbian, it was also not a decision I assumed I would ever have to face in the first place.

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<sup>1</sup> *A note on terminology:* in an effort to be precise about which constituencies are encompassed in terminology, I use LGBTQIA+, the most common acronym at the time of this writing, as an umbrella term to designate non-straight sexualities and genders. Other abbreviations, for example, LGB and LGBT, refer to contexts in which particular identities are specified; that is, these acronyms are intentionally non-inclusive. Finally, I use "gay" and "lesbian" to refer to specific identities, whereas "queer" is meant to designate non- and anti-normative practices and embodiments.

When I started graduate school at the University of Minnesota in the 1990s, challenges to state marriage laws by same-sex couples became more frequent and *gay marriage*, as it was non-inclusively termed in the US, became part of the mainstream lesbian and gay political mainstay. Simultaneously, I encountered queer theory, which offered a new way of understanding gender and “compulsory heterosexuality,” as elaborated by Adrienne Rich. Queer theorists, most especially Judith Butler, redefined gender as an effect of a fictional, yet naturalized series of reiterations or performances. Rather than conceiving it as either a role imposed from without or an essence from within, these early queer theorists posited that gender was a technology of both legibility and exclusion. Institutions like marriage thereby become the arbiters of whose identities and relationships deserve validation. Because of its interest in earning institutional recognition, same-sex marriage poses no challenge to heteronormativity as its strategies are grounded in a politics of assimilation, normalization, and respectability. As with its heterosexual variant, in same-sex unions a surrogate of the state sanctifies the monogamous, romantic relationship between two properly gendered subjects who are productive members of society. Furthermore, a married couple earns not just legal status, but also access to a litany of exclusive entitlements, many of which have very little to do with the organization of one’s private affiliations.

Subsequent developments include Roderick Ferguson’s queer of color critique, which much like intersectional feminism, challenges homogenizing accounts of the relationship between marginal identities and power. The queer of color critique demonstrates that both hetero- and homonormativity are deeply invested in privileging whiteness, the able- and normatively-bodied, and middle-class consumerism. What is required is a new queer politics that focuses not on a single, undifferentiated axis of identity, but one where “the *nonnormative* and *marginal* position of punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens, for example, is the basis for progressive transformative coalition work” (Cohen 438). Instead of being more inclusive, legal same-sex marriage further ossifies the division between *good gays* and socially disreputable forms of queer kinship (e.g., polyamory, non-sexual relationships, inter-generational affiliations, families of choice), queer embodiments (e.g., nonbinary, Two-Spirit, trans), and queer heterosexualities (e.g., the anti-Black and misogynist pathologization of households headed by women, the erasure of Indigenous matrilineal kinship arrangements).

These two activist and intellectual traditions—intersectional feminism and queer theory—form the crux of my professional and personal epistemology. With respect to the former, much of my scholarship, including teaching, focuses on exploring the socio-historical pressures that produce and regulate norms of identity in Germanophone cultures. I frequently build on this kind of analysis by revealing the failures of normative discourse, that is, how these pressures are never wholly efficient. Consequently, I explore points of tension, ambivalence, and rupture, as they apply to queerness and citizenship. In this essay, I employ an intersectional feminist-queer analytic to examine the political debates around the so-called *Homo-Ehe*<sup>2</sup> or *Lebenspartnerschaftsgesetz* (*LPartG*) that occurred at the turn of the last century. I was in Germany when the *Bundestag* ultimately passed the legislation in 2000, as well as in 2001, when same-sex couples could legally register their partnerships for the first time. With my academic interest in exploring the tensions between sexuality and the state, along with my long-standing critique of the institution of marriage, I keenly followed Germany's national conversation on whether the right to wed should extend to lesbians and gay men. Instead of drawing from the radical impulses of West German feminism and LGBT movements of the late 1960s and 1970s, the proponents of same-sex marriage deployed an overwhelmingly conservative, family-values discourse reminiscent of the early postwar years. Its opponents took a similar tack and, for the most part, did not rely upon explicitly homophobic rhetoric about the fundamental perversity of homosexuality that dominated earlier discussions about lesbian and gay rights.

While marriage equality would not be legalized in the us until about fifteen years after same-sex couples in Germany could register as domestic partners, the rhetoric employed in both national settings confirmed my belief that marriage was not an institution that could be transformed as long as the state was the covert third party. Given this

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<sup>2</sup> The demeaning term *Homo-Ehe* was informally used in public discourse to refer to the *LPartG*. The law did not extend full-fledged marital rights to lesbian and gay couples, but rather recognized same-sex unions only as domestic partnerships with limited privileges. Thus, the term *Homo-Ehe* was used to differentiate it from heterosexual marriage both in terms of its legal scope, but also as distinct from the values and traditions of the institution of marriage itself. The catachrestic term *marriage equality* used in the us to describe legal same-sex unions is also problematic. As I demonstrate throughout this essay, civil marriage in the us and Germany operates within a rights-based discourse. However, both in terms of its history and as a contemporary arrangement of kinship, the institution remains non-inclusive and assimilationist. Thus, we should not take the claim to equality literally.

position, the reader might be surprised to learn that in 2018, my partner and I legally wed. This essay is an exploration of a tension that has long been described by feminists as between the personal and political. It experiments with genre and combines personal narrative with academic analysis, a rhetorical strategy that Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres champions, though it is new to me. To this end, I bookend my discussion of the *LPartG* with reflections from my own life. I open with the pre-ceremony statement my partner and I read at our recent wedding and close with a meditation on the irreconcilable contradictions engendered when the clarity of one's politics and real-life decisions are at odds. By expanding the reach of my scholarly theories and methods, I hope to demonstrate how these are not only tools for cultural analysis, but also reveal important truths about the complexity of individual choice.

### **Statement on Marriage, Alison and Andrea Guenther-Pal, August 12, 2018**

Almost exactly thirty years ago, my partner Andy and I held a private commitment ceremony in Mendocino, a picturesque town on the coast of Northern California. As couples began to challenge state marriage laws and later when the Defense of Marriage Act or DOMA was passed, we rejected the political prioritization of gay marriage that the mainstream lesbian and gay movement actively pursued. When the US Supreme Court ruled the ban on same-sex marriage unconstitutional in several landmark decisions, we celebrated, of course, and were especially proud of the plaintiffs in the California case, one of whom is a friend from college. Yet, we did not want to take the plunge ourselves. Nevertheless, in the summer of 2018, at a second idyllic coastal California setting (my folks' backyard), surrounded by our family, we did just that. Before the officiating began, we read the following statement which expressed some of our reservations about marriage.

In April of 1991, we held a private ceremony in Mendocino, California, to pledge our love and commitment to one other. The rings from that ceremony are those that we will be exchanging today. Since that time, the legal rights of same-sex couples have undergone significant changes, as have social attitudes about LGBTQ

people. Important rights that had been explicitly denied to many queer people are now no longer the law. When we first made our vows to each other in 1991, we never expected that marriage, inheritance, healthcare, family immigration status, and countless additional benefits afforded to heterosexual couples would become available to us in our lifetime. When marriage equality was ultimately federally recognized in 2015, we cheered, along with many others.

Nevertheless, we stand here today with feelings of both joy and unease as we experience the cognitive dissonance of holding two contrary values, both true. On the one hand, we hold an abiding belief in and commitment to our love for one another, and we embrace our right to declare and celebrate this in the presence of our families and friends. At the same time, as we think systemically and critically about the institution, we recognize that our decision to take advantage of state-sanctioned marriage implicates us in an oppressive system that we find abhorrent. We are now able to choose legal marriage, and we do so in order to gain access to the economic and participatory benefits that have increasing personal relevance to us as we grow older. Yet we also value and celebrate that our relationship was forged and has thrived outside of state sanction or approval.

None of us can exist in society without being complicit in systems of domination, systems that privilege some and exclude many. We understand that the institution of marriage was not created for us. In its conception and continued practice in the US, state-sanctioned marriage is a patriarchal, normative, and coercive institution. We have ourselves been excluded, until recently, from the litany of benefits and the social status afforded through civil marriage. The fact that we are now legally allowed entry into this institution does not, however, redeem its racist, classist, patriarchal, colonialist, and gender normative framework. In fact, we fundamentally reject and seek to dismantle a system that coercively regulates consensual human intimacy and binds basic human rights to state-sanctioned relationship status.

It is impossible for us to fully experience the joy of this celebration today without also recognizing and affirming our commitment to the right of all to live freely, to be afforded basic human rights, and to enter into intimate and family relationships of their own choosing. Thus, we ask today that you join us in reflecting upon the many people who, still today, are unable to access these basic rights. We ask that you join us in acknowledging that there are many who are still harmed, coerced, and profoundly disadvantaged by the continuation of this institution as currently practiced. We ask that you join with us as we acknowledge our own class, race, cisgender, and relationship privilege in being able to now access the numerous benefits that can and will significantly impact our economic and personal well-being. And finally, we ask that you join with us to acknowledge and celebrate the limitless constellations of kinship and the diversity of identities and embodiments through which people live and love.

**“Die schwule Bewegung ist tot!”:  
Homo-Ehe and German Family Values  
at the Beginning of the Third Millennium**

In May 1949, the West German Constitution was ratified and included Article 6, a provision requiring that (heterosexual) marriage and the (patriarchal) family receive the special protection of the state. Article 6 reflected the postwar ideology that the success of the new Federal Republic was dependent upon the privileging of marriage and the nuclear family unit. Policymakers maintained that the family was central to re-establishing social and economic stability, normalizing sexual behavior, and promoting democracy. West Germany’s first Minister of Family Affairs, Franz-Josef Wuermeling, whose Catholic family values rhetoric was significant in shaping this conservative ideology, put it thusly: “Millionen innerlich gesunder Familien mit rechschaffen erzogenen Kindern sind als Sicherung gegen die kinderreichen Völker des Ostens mindestens so wichtig wie alle militärischen Sicherungen” (“Millions of emotionally stable families with properly raised children are as important a security against the populous peoples

of the East as any military force”); my trans.; qtd. in Haensch 74–75). As a microcosm of the state, the traditional family represented the *Keimzelle*, *Urzelle*, and *Kraftquelle* of society, and consequently, the rehabilitation of the family became the surest path to political normalization in the wake of the Third Reich and at beginning of the Cold War.

This brief background is meant to reveal how the status of marriage and the family remain central to the construction of citizenship and equality in a reunified Germany, through an examination of the debates around the German *Lebenspartnerschaftsgesetz*. I argue that contemporary constructions of marriage and family fold back onto their conceptual counterparts from the Adenauer Era (1949–1963). I begin with a brief historical overview of West German LGBT and feminist activism, which viewed marriage and family as fundamentally repressive. I then analyze the debates around the *LPartG* both within the *Bundestag* and in the public sphere to demonstrate that the radical impulse from previous emancipation movements had been replaced by a politics of respectability. Ultimately, much like in the early years of the Federal Republic, family values were inextricable from ideas about citizenship and equality. And at the most recent turn of the century, these were weaponized by liberal actors in the discourse that ensured the passage of Germany’s first law to regulate same-sex unions.

On June 28, 1969, the Stonewall uprising on Christopher Street in Greenwich Village spurred what is generally understood as the beginning of an international modern LGBT liberation movement in North America and Western Europe, a movement that was also tied to a larger radical leftist social movement occurring primarily on university campuses. In West Germany, efforts to mobilize gay men and lesbians for the cause of emancipation are commonly said to have begun in 1971 at the premiere of Rosa von Praunheim’s gay activist film, *Nicht der Homosexuelle ist pervers, sondern die Situation, in der er lebt* (*It Is Not the Homosexual Who Is Perverse, But the Society in Which He Lives*).<sup>3</sup> The thematization of the daily struggles of gay men and the film’s call to action prompted the founding of the *Homosexuelle Aktion Westberlin*

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<sup>3</sup> By most accounts, the Stonewall uprising is thought of as the beginning of Western LGBT movements. Its impact in West Germany must be more thoroughly explored, in particular with respect to what knowledge gays and lesbians had about the uprising. Von Praunheim, for example, was unaware of Stonewall when he made *Nicht der Homosexuelle* (Kuzniar 94). Historian Carla MacDougall challenges the validity of the narrative that constructs the Stonewall rebellion as the watershed moment in LGBT activism in West Germany (10).

(*HAW*) and other similar groups throughout the Federal Republic. *HAW* had both gay and lesbian members until 1975 when a group of women split from the organization to form the *Lesbische Aktions-Zentrum (LAZ)*. In their political work, *LAZ* pursued the radical and/or socialist goals of the autonomous women's movement, offering a critique of normative sexuality, monogamy, marriage and kinship, and male privilege. Because gender equality was part of the *Grundgesetz* (Basic Law or Constitution), liberal feminism never truly took hold in West Germany the way it had, for example, in the US, where there was a nation-wide and subsequently unsuccessful campaign for the adoption of an equal rights amendment. At the same time, the separatist vision of forming a *lesbian nation* insulated from patriarchal oppression was also not generally embraced by the *LAZ* and other lesbian organizations. Instead, they were "concerned with building a social community based on sexual preference and gender while also attempting to communicate their politics on a broader scale and to a larger audience" (MacDougall 8).

The West German gay men's liberation movement of the 1970s was essentially split in its objectives. On the one hand, there were those involved in the alternative scene, who were members of *HAW* and wanted to establish a gay counterculture. These men saw attempts at political reform as requiring work within a fundamentally homophobic and sexist system. On the other hand were older activists who had come of age in the 1950s; they may have been part of the earlier homophile movement, and their integrationist political strategies had succeeded in the 1969 and 1973 reforms of §175—the federal anti-sodomy statute. After the first reports of GRID (Gay-Related Immune Disease) in the early 1980s, activists mobilized internationally in the struggle against HIV and AIDS. In West Germany and the US in particular, HIV/AIDS activists signified the mainstream public and political response to the pandemic by evoking the Holocaust. They deployed the symbol of the pink triangle to demonstrate the continuity between the persecution of homosexuals during the Third Reich and the silence around the current health crisis (Jensen). By 1989, the reformist direction of gay political activity and the recent prominence of liberal gay activists such as Volker Beck and Günter Dworek caused those in the movement to declare, "Die schwule Bewegung ist tot, es lebe das homosexuelle Berufsbeamtentum!" ("The gay movement is dead, long live the bourgeois-homosexual bureaucracy!"; my trans.; Etgeton 11).

In 2000, a now reunited Germany adopted the *LPartG* allowing same-sex couples to register their partnerships and receive access to

some of the privileges previously afforded only to married heterosexuals.<sup>4</sup> Propelled foremost by the joint efforts of the Green Party and Germany's largest LGB organization, the *Lesben- und Schwulenverband in Deutschland e. V. (LSVD)*, the sometimes heated discussion of the rights of gay men and lesbians to marry took place on the floor of the *Bundestag*, in the mainstream media, and within LGBTQIA+ organizations. These debates reveal how German knowledge about the institutions of the family and marriage, equal and sexual rights, and history was constructed.

Neither vitriolic diatribes cataloging the immorality of homosexuals nor lengthy testimony by experts as to the causes of homosexuality dominated the discussion around the rights of gay men and lesbians to have their relationships recognized by the state. The early postwar question of whether homosexuality was hereditary, acquired, or psychological had already been answered and was so obvious that it hardly warranted mention. The comparatively minor discourse from the 1950s used to argue for the reform or abolishment of §175 which held that homosexuality was simply a variant of human sexuality had, in the meantime, essentially become established knowledge. In 1957, the Supreme Court took the position that male homosexuality was a triple threat: it endangered the new democracy, vulnerable young men, and the patriarchal family.<sup>5</sup> Some forty years later, they asserted in their written opinion on the constitutional challenge to the *LPartG* that homosexuality does not result from seduction or upbringing, but rather develops due to a biological predisposition (Bundesverfassungsgericht Part III, no. 1). With few notable exceptions, by the time of the marriage debates, even those against the so-called *Homo-Ehe* publicly presented the position that homosexuality was a natural and predisposed alternate form of sexuality.

The full-blown *Kulturkampf* that religious conservatives portended was largely hidden behind vague and confusing legalistic arguments about the constitutionality of the *LPartG*. The one substantive claim

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4 It is too complicated to go into here, but the law was actually divided into two parts because of the difficulties its proponents saw in getting support from the *Bundesrat* for certain provisions, namely those around taxes. This splitting of the law was one of the legal arguments that Saxony, Thuringia, and Bavaria used to support their Supreme Court case that the *LPartG* was unconstitutional, and they lost their case on all counts. Political scientist Kelly Kollman provides an important history of the global political mobilization around legislating same-sex marriage in Western Europe and North America ("Same-Sex Unions").

5 See Moeller's comprehensive and illuminating discussion of this case ("The Homosexual").

made by the law's conservative opponents, the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) Party, was that it equated registered partnerships for gay and lesbian couples with marriage, and since marriage and the family enjoyed "special protection" under Article 6 of the *Grundgesetz*,<sup>6</sup> the proposed law was unconstitutional. Although the conservative party largely avoided framing their opposition to the law in terms of immorality or social danger, they expressed concern about the erosion (*Aushöhlung*) of the nuclear family and heterosexual marriage and returned to earlier rhetorical strategies whereby these institutions were, as CDU *Bundestag* member Wolfgang Bosbach put it, "die Keimzelle jeder staatlichen Gemeinschaft" ("the nucleus of every community of the state"; my trans.; 1). Norbert Geis, Bosbach's colleague in the parliament, asserted that the family and marriage were under threat just as they had been under National Socialism and during the Cold War. According to this narrative, the Constitution and the new German family rose simultaneously from the postwar rubble and a miracle occurred:

Es war aber vor allem ein Grund, der aus der Nachkriegserfahrung der Väter und Mütter unserer Verfassung resultierte: Als nämlich 1945 unser Land vollständig am Boden und in Trümmern lag, als der Staat nicht mehr funktionierte, als die Einzelnen sich selbst überlassen waren, gab es ein Wunder: Die Familien haben zusammengehalten. Sie haben dieses Land mit einer Vitalität ohnegleichen wieder aufgebaut. Der schnelle Wiederaufbau, das Wirtschaftswunder wäre ohne die Vitalität der Familien nicht möglich gewesen.

(It was above all one reason [why marriage and family receive special protection] that resulted from the postwar experience of fathers and mothers: namely in 1945, as our country lay in complete ruins, as the state no longer functioned, as individuals had to depend only on themselves, a miracle occurred: the family remained intact.

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6 The part of Article 6 in question, at least according to the opponents of the law, was, "Ehe und Familie stehen unter dem besonderen Schutze der staatlichen Ordnung." ("Marriage and the family shall enjoy the special protection of the state.").

Families built this country with an unprecedented vitality.  
 The rapid reconstruction, the “economic miracle” would  
 not have been possible without the vitality of families.;  
*Deutscher Bundestag* 14/131; my trans.; 12614-15)

Instead of referencing a more universal origin story of the family, Geis’s testimony paints a picture of the Federal Republic and the postwar family as fraternal twins. In contrast to similar discussions in the US that conceived of the family as the cradle of civilization, German politicians declared a more recent date of birth.

Opponents of the law avoided explicit attacks on homosexuality itself. Instead of homosexual behavior representing a perversion, supporters of the law were now accused of “perverting” the Constitution. Former Supreme Court Justice Paul Kirchhof, for instance, called the law “eine Perversion des Verfassungsauftrages” (“a perversion of the constitutional mandate”; my trans.; qtd. in Darnstädt et al. 84). This position was decidedly anachronistic in its evocation of the rhetoric used to demonize homosexuality in Adenauer’s Germany. However, explicitly homophobic language was more or less limited to statements made by some members of the mostly Catholic clergy. They diagnosed the dissolution of the Christian Occident and spoke of homosexuality as degenerate, against the divine order of creation (*Schöpfungsordnung*), and a threat to youth.<sup>7</sup> In his remarks on the *LPartG*, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now pope emeritus Benedict XVI, called the adoption of children by gays and lesbians *child abuse* and believed that the law would have a damaging effect on morality (qtd. in Braun 10). As in the early postwar years, anxiety about a declining birthrate was once again instrumentalized as a way of castigating gays and lesbians as unproductive members of society. Children should have a (white, Christian) mother and a father.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See the conversation between Fulda archbishop Johannes Dyba and Green Party member Volker Beck, the so-called father of the *Homo-Ehe*, published in *Der Spiegel* (Mestmacher and Wensierski 88). The letters to the editor in response to Dyba’s remarks in an earlier issue of *Der Spiegel* suggest that the clergyman’s position on the *LPartG* and homosexuality in general did not resonate with *Spiegel*-readership. Letter writers called his views medieval and reminiscent of National Socialism (“Verkommene Ansichten” 17).

<sup>8</sup> Geis, for example, said “Nirgendwo erfahren die Kinder größere Geborgenheit als bei Vater und Mutter” (“Nowhere do children experience a stronger feeling of security than with their mother and father”; *Deutscher Bundestag* 14/115; my trans.; 10962).

Curiously, given the radical critiques of patriarchal family structures by the New Left and LGBT movements of the late 1960s and 1970s, as well as by feminists, the proponents of the *LPartG* also placed the family in the center of their rhetorical framework, and understood the issue of legally recognizing monogamous same-sex relationships as a matter of equal rights. Gay men and lesbians, they argued, comprise a minority. As such, the state has an obligation to protect minority groups from discrimination and to provide them with full citizenship rights. Denying gay men and lesbians the right to marriage, or to a marriage-like (*ehe-ähnlich*) institution, relegates them to second-class status. This reasoning represented a significant departure from the ideological legacy of earlier radical, feminist, and leftist activists, who advanced a critique of bourgeois society and, in particular, its repressive attitude towards sexuality.<sup>9</sup> They sought alternative models of community and understood the institutions of the nuclear family and heterosexual marriage as symptomatic of a bourgeois patriarchal capitalist system. Through a discourse of radical liberation, not civil rights, they challenged sexual norms, and aimed to change social attitudes about monogamy, reproductive issues, marriage and kinship, sexual mores, and male privilege.

Whether primarily for strategic or philosophical reasons, the campaigners for the registered domestic partnership initiative started from the same assumption as their opponents: long-term monogamous relationships are valuable to the state and as such should be institutionalized. Aligning themselves with a politics of respectability, the pro-*Homo-Ehe* representatives were quick to point out that the *LPartG* had nothing to do with sex, but rather with the reproduction of values that are already a part of liberal democracy. Volker Beck asserted that, “Dies ist kein Projekt der Libertinage. Es ist ein republikanisches Projekt der Beendigung von Diskriminierung, ein Projekt einer wertorientierten und wertbestärkenden Politik” (“This is not a libertine agenda. It is a project of the republic to end discrimination, a project informed by a values-based and values-strengthening politics”; Deutscher Bundestag 14/115; my trans.; 10964). In response to the conservative charge that the law threatened the marriage and family article of the Constitution, advocates of the *LPartG* needed to emphasize the ways in which the law was unlike heterosexual

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9 Kelly Kollman makes a related observation in her article that compares the different approaches to same-sex unions in Austria and Germany (“European Institutions” 58).

marriage.<sup>10</sup> Gay men and lesbians who registered their partnerships with the government could not, for example, adopt children as a couple, nor were they eligible for certain tax breaks.

But what initially appeared to be simply a tactical maneuver ended up looking more like an assertion of the value of Article 6. Social Democratic representative Margot von Renesse suggested that the institutions of marriage and family would be even more powerful as a result of the *LPartG*: “Durch die Ausdehnung dieses verantwortlichen, verlässlichen und verbindlichen Rechtsinstituts auf andere, die nicht heiraten können, steigern wir die Bedeutung des von der Ehe und Familie ausgehenden Magnetismus, der Aura der Begeisterung für wechselseitige Verantwortung” (“By making this reliable, secure, legally binding institution available to those who cannot marry, we elevate the appeal of marriage and family, the aura of enthusiasm for mutual responsibility”; *Deutscher Bundestag* 14/115; my trans.; 10959–61). Finally, they pointed out that the continued exclusion of gay men and lesbians from those rights enjoyed by married heterosexuals was part of the appalling German legacy of homosexual persecution. Volker Beck declared to the parliament, “dieses Haus [ist] den Schwulen und Lesben etwas schuldig” (“this house of law owes gays and lesbians something”; *Deutscher Bundestag* 14/115; my trans.; 10964). Beck’s and other similar statements imagined a direct line from the Holocaust and the pre-1969 climate of secrecy brought about by the constant threat of prosecution under §175 to the present-day (*Deutscher Bundestag* 14/115 10959–61).

More radical critiques suggesting new ways of thinking about the family did, however tentatively, make it to the floor of the *Bundestag*. The Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), which ultimately voted not to support the law, argued that the concept of marriage was outmoded and that the diversity of kinship constellations in present-day Germany needed to be reflected in the legal code. PDS representative Christina Schenk said, “In einer pluralistischen Gesellschaft muss der Staat die real gelebte **Vielfalt des Zusammenlebens** anerkennen und darf nicht einseitig das Ehemodell privilegieren” (“In a pluralistic society, the state must recognize the diverse, real-world ways of living together and may not unilaterally privilege the marriage model”; *Deutscher Bundestag* 14/115; my trans.; 10969). The impetus for re-establishing the *wissen-*

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<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, the *Spiegel* interview with minister of justice Herta Däubler-Gmelin (Lersch 103) and the Beck/Dyba debate mentioned earlier.

*schaftlich-humanitäres komitee* (*whk*)—the first iteration of which is widely assumed to be the first LGBT rights organization—was in part to provide a voice of dissent for the assimilationist goals of the mainstream gay movement, in particular Volker Beck's and others' work to legislate the *Homo-Ehe*. The *whk*'s position on the *LPartG* was that, far from providing more rights, the law inappropriately made the private realm of sexuality a matter of public legislation. The lesbian organization *Lesben-Ring* was also critical of the law because it perpetuated the privileging of marriage in the politics of the family. And at the 1999 Christopher Street Day parade in Berlin, participants holding *whk* banners emblazoned with their demand “Ehe raus aus dem Grundgesetz!” (“Ban marriage from the Constitution!”; my trans.) were observed. But these voices were comparatively few and represented a minor position in the debates.

At the beginning of the third millennium, the ideology around the family and marriage raised the specter of the early years of the Federal Republic. When the *Grundgesetz* was debated after the war, the provisions of Article 6 were put into writing to serve as a protective measure that was in part a response to the perceived perversion of the family under National Socialism. Consequently, this portion of the Constitution reflects the postwar ideology that the success of the new Federal Republic was dependent upon the privileging of marriage and the family unit (Cf. Moeller, *Protecting Motherhood* 65–71). Accordingly, the family was the ideal unit of social organization in a democracy and institutionalizing monogamous heterosexual life partnerships provided the framework for understanding sexual life. The debates of the *LPartG* demonstrate that the status of marriage and the family remain central to the ways in which citizenship and equality are constructed in a unified Germany. These were examined only in terms of either broadening or continuing to limit the concept of marriage and the impact that such actions would have on the stability of the family and the nation.

Activists in the leftist LGBT movements and the autonomous feminist organizations of the late 1960s and 1970s viewed the institutions of marriage and family as fundamentally repressive and offered a radical critique of the hierarchal organization of patriarchal capitalism. They argued that the social regulation of sexuality and gender existed to serve the interests of a conservative politics of the bourgeois family. However, when same-sex marriage received high-profile political attention in the 1990s, the function and definition of

the family and marriage, and most crucially, the role of the state in what are in principle private alliances, were not fundamentally interrogated by the major actors in the *Homo-Ehe* debates. Rather, these institutions were seen as fulfilling important social functions and, in its rhetoric, the mainstream liberal wing of the lesbian and gay movement turned to civil rights discourses emphasizing equality, tolerance, and assimilation. In 2017, the *LPartG* was essentially replaced by a new law that provides married same-sex and heterosexual couples with identical rights.

### Can You Grow a Radical Tree from Tainted Roots?

Given its postwar history and, more recently, reunification, what shaped the precise contours of the German discourse around same-sex unions differed in important ways from discussions in the US. However, as in the German case, the US mobilization to legalize same-sex marriage also relied on the logic of assimilation and rights-based politics in a democracy. The law on marriage equality, as it was more commonly referred to stateside, would not be enacted in the US until nearly a decade and a half after federal domestic partner registration was possible for gay and lesbian couples in Germany.<sup>11</sup>

My partner and I did not participate in any of the mainstream organizing to support marriage equality, nor did we view it as an important political priority. So, what led us to ultimately make the decision to legally marry, when our position on marriage has not changed since the 1980s? The reader might assume that I find myself in a constant state of cognitive dissonance. Before I began writing this essay, I, too, thought this was a possibility. The cure for cognitive dissonance is, of course, consonance, and to achieve consonance, one must relinquish one of the contradictory beliefs. Yet I have not changed my ideas about marriage to fit my marital status. Doesn't this make me a hypocrite? The hypocrite—whose linguistic origin is the Greek stage actor, someone who pretends—is similarly inaccurate, because my

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11 Same-sex marriage was permissible in many states and in Guam before the federal Supreme Court ruled in 2015 that DOMA was unconstitutional. One of the legal grounds used to argue against the ban was the Fourteenth Amendment, which was adopted during US Reconstruction to extend citizenship and equal rights to formerly enslaved people. The 2015 case illustrates the imbrication of race and sexuality as advanced in the queer of color critique.

actions are not a pretense. I've never sought to hide the contradiction between my decision to marry and my critique of the institution; indeed, more often than not, I call attention to it. I suddenly recall Ruth-Ellen's rejoinder that *radical* means to get to the root of. In the final section of this essay, I explore the roots of these apparent contradictions.

The mainstream LGBT movement's focus on marriage equality was manifestly invested in homonormativity. Activists relinquished the opportunity to advocate for truly radical, plural, and inclusive forms of kinship that do not depend on their validity through proximity to straightness. Instead of marriage reform, an intersectional feminist-queer politics demands a reconceptualization of family, separating it from the patriarchal and colonialist economy of white supremacy and bloodlines, dislodging the myriad entitlements from marital status, and insulating private affiliations from the reach of the state. However, now that same-sex unions are legally recognized, different questions emerge, and their answers cannot be captured within a binary pro/con rubric. We must ask what purposes and effects do (non-)participation have? Does eschewing legal marriage bring us closer to realizing feminist-queer priorities? Can the institution of marriage be perverted from within? Can we afford to give up what marriage currently provides? These questions exemplify the ineluctably complicated choices that marginalized people and those outside of the political mainstream face—and uncoincidentally, their answers illustrate the inseparability of the personal and political as well as of theory and practice.

Helga Thorson's essay in this volume is a productive exploration of feminist choices and the limits of personal agency. She writes that, "Not all choices are available to everyone in the same way, and the same decision could elicit completely different responses and results in diverse contexts" (12). Decisions are not made by free and autonomous subjects; instead, agency is determined by social apparatuses designed to restrict choice for some and endow others with greater freedom and alternatives. Moreover, people belonging to marginalized groups not only encounter more limited options, but the consequences of each are typically also more complicated and contingent. With marriage, I face a Faustian dilemma of participating in an institution for which I have a fundamental antipathy, and at the same time of existing in a system that metes out privileges based on marital status. As I write this, COVID-19 is raging throughout the US and is particularly acute in Wisconsin where I currently live. Because as a group, we are disproportionately affected by the pandemic, accessing affordable healthcare through a

spouse's insurance, securing hospital visitation, making medical decisions for one's partner, and ensuring social security and survivorship benefits are pressing issues for LGBTQIA+ communities. The impacts of COVID (including access to the vaccine) on queer BIPOC are even greater, not to mention the racial and economic inequalities that until recently were barely acknowledged by white people. Draconian immigration and residency policies have become even more so under the last US president as have their intensified—and selective—enforcement by both Republican and Democratic administrations. Marriage to a US citizen may be the only legal way for some to remain in the country. As these examples demonstrate, the domain of sexuality encompasses race, gender, ability, class, and other dimensions of hierarchy. When access to benefits that should never have been linked to marriage in the first place are regarded as privileges rather than rights, no one should suggest that it is politically suspect to marry. Writing of the increased necessity of gaining access to these entitlements as she and her partner aged—a concern that my partner and I had as well—Claudia Card emphasizes that coercion circumscribes this decision: “Marrying under such conditions is not a totally free choice” (7). Participation and non-participation in any institution—especially one in which the state's power to sanctify certain affiliations and reject others—is always mediated by an individual's location within a system of dominance and hierarchy. A wedding can certainly represent a meaningful rite of passage for a couple. However, as a public affirmation and extension of privileges regulated by the government, the ritual's coercive function is obscured by its summoning of affect and relies on a deeply ingrained cultural imaginary of romantic fate, sexual fidelity, and self-determination.

In 1996, same-sex unions were first addressed by the US legislature in the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA). As gay and lesbian couples challenged state laws with increasing frequency, homophobic, anti-marriage-equality advocates feared that including same-sex partnerships in the institution would be the ultimate cause of its downfall, the final nail in what had already been imperiled by divorce, single mothers, and changing sexual mores. In a fit of moral hysteria, lawmakers introduced DOMA to preempt any future legislative discussion of a federal same-sex marriage policy. With just two sentences, legal marriage would be defined as a union between one man (a husband) and one woman (a wife), and states, territories, or Native American Nations would not be required to recognize same-sex marriages performed else-

where. Congressman Bob Barr, the law's main author, opined in the House debate that, "The very foundations of our society are in danger of being burned" by legions of married queers. Stretching the metaphor to its limit, he continued that concerted action was needed to guard heterosexual marriage from "[t]he flames of hedonism, the flames of narcissism, the flames of self-centered morality [that] are licking at the very foundations of our society: the family unit" (*Congressional Record* H7482). Others were slightly more restrained in voicing their fears that traditional marriage would be demeaned by legitimizing what they regarded as fundamentally immoral relationships (see statements by Funderburk, Lipinski, or Smith in the *Congressional Record*). Likely unwittingly, DOMA supporters advanced an argument that marriage—arguably the most potent instrument of heteronormativity—was so fragile that it would be rapidly perverted by an infiltration of queers and sexual renegades. I find the paranoia of this argument laughable; yet liberal proponents of marriage maintain that the institution can be reformed or changed from within. However, I wish to address this issue from a different direction. Instead of imagining how we might change marriage, I'm interested in how it changes us.

J. Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place* explores the promise of queer time, which revels in imaginative identities and idiosyncratic life narratives. It functions as a counter-temporality to heteronormative time. Marriage represents a milestone that denotes one's place in a heteronormative progress narrative of successful adulthood marked by "temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance" (6). The project of gay and lesbian liberation unfolds in heteronormative time and traffics in discourses of inclusion and (neo)liberal rights. Marriage equality—as the latter part of the term suggests—relies on the interchangeability of the heterosexual and homonormative couple. In the life course of the *good gay* couple, white weddings and gaybies are merely analogues of straight horology. In other words, there is nothing queer about marriage.

Every legal marriage ceremony in the US is solemnized by an authorized surrogate of the state. The officiant publicly pronounces a couple legally married and thus "puts into effect the relation it names." Through the utterance "I now pronounce you ..." participants are no longer separate individuals, but are made intelligible through discourse in relation to each other (Butler, "Critically Queer" 17–20). Irrespective of the particular strategies for negotiating power within their relationship, each member of the couple is positioned hierarchically within a

heteronormative matrix.<sup>12</sup> Through this “performative act” (Butler, “Critically Queer”), *I am a wife* and all that it implies: I am made to occupy a subordinate position, regardless of there not being a *husband* in my dyad. Each time my partner or I are referred to as *wife*, which occurs with some regularity, this subordinate position is reaffirmed. In other words, when I am “hailed,” to use Althusser’s useful coinage (117–20), it forces a recognition of myself as being situated in relation to men. Although the category *woman* functions similarly—but not identically, because few social interactions necessitate being addressed as woman—this is the gender with which I identify. On the other hand, wife is not only akin to being called by the wrong name, it feels like a punishment, like I am being put in my place. To be sure, the fact that I actively reject the term makes it easier for me to understand its function as regulating and enforcing heteronormative gender relations, but its effect is the shame of subordination.

A second effect of the performative marriage pronouncement is that what was once private and invisible immediately becomes public and hypervisible. In the past, I controlled which details of my relationship I shared, if any. Now, specific, intimate knowledge assumed to correspond with my new marital status is freely available to an astonishing variety of entities and nameless individuals including the government, myriad service providers, and my employer. Simply the action of checking “married” on a form calls forth an entire complex of knowledge about my and my partner’s gender, our sexual life, the arrangement of our finances and household, and a great deal more. My unease with this should not be understood as nostalgia for the closet, but rather with the apparition of norms that now accompany me. Marriage is comprised of a limited, self-evident, and fossilized set of practices and social arrangements. For instance, in the sexual domain, marriage assumes, among other things, that the members of the couple relate to each other primarily as romantic partners who have chosen each other to live together long-term and that they have sex exclusively with each other and in private. It further presupposes that each partner’s sexuality and gender identity are stable and affixed to only one of an extremely limited number of possible categories, and that the gender of one partner is congruent with the sexual identity of the other. These

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12 Judith Butler uses the term “heterosexual matrix” to designate the system of discourses that naturalizes sex, gender, and sexuality, each defined relationally through compulsory heterosexuality (*Gender Trouble* 151, n. 6).

assumptions circumscribe me and every other legally married person irrespective of the ways we may live out our relationship. Because its normalizing scope succeeds just as much by exercising power through operations of exclusion as inclusion, marriage simultaneously disavows all non-normative forms of gendered sexual relationality; examples are affiliations that are not primary, sexual, romantic, or long-term; polyamory; genderqueer, genderfluid, non-binary, and Two-Spirit people; and lesbians married to men. Exclusion on this basis not only creates two discursive categories—respectable good gays and illegitimate queers—but also intensifies the profound material effects that continue to disadvantage people marginalized on the bases of gender and sexuality. Of course, heteronormativity is also highly racialized and entrenched in ableism. As an instrument at the crux of reproduction, ableist white supremacy is preserved by promoting procreation between healthy white people and restricting interracial and BIPOC marriages. This was once achieved through eugenic policies and colonial marriage and anti-miscegenation laws. Today we can trace these in governmental policies that trigger a reduction in or loss of benefits when people with disabilities marry, reproductive technologies that allow donor selection based on race and medical history, blood quantum laws, and extrajudicial segregation and chronic disinvestment in communities of color. Being married incorporates me into an institution that by design ensures the generational preservation of an ableist white supremacy. My normative identities—white, educated, middle-class, currently able-bodied, and cisgender—contribute to its longevity.

DOMA passed in a bipartisan landslide. This must have been greatly reassuring to the bill's supporters who feared that heterosexual marriage was so fragile that it required federal legislation to prohibit lesbian and gay couples from legally wedding, despite it (supposedly) being the bedrock of centuries of civilization. However, those who ultimately voted for DOMA—including our current Democratic president—underestimated the formidable power of the institution of marriage. They imagined its end, if they allowed us access. Yet, there has been no modern-day fall of Rome in the years since marriage equality was successfully litigated. Instead, the state's reach into our private lives has become even more extensive and assimilatory cultural norms are yet another insidious way to exclude the extremely marginalized. In 1996, Congressman Lamar Smith lamented from the House floor, "Same-sex 'marriages' demean the fundamental institution of marriage. They

legitimize unnatural and immoral behavior. And they trivialize marriage as a mere ‘lifestyle choice’” (*Congressional Record* 7494). If only ...



FIGURE 2.1

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# Chapter 3

## **Unboxed**



# Unboxed: On Media, Memory, and the Material Archive

## Angelica Fenner

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**Angelica Fenner** is Associate Professor of German and Cinema Studies at the University of Toronto, an institution located on the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and most recently, the Mississaugas of the Credit River. Her research interests encompass women's film authorship in German and European cinema, diaspora and migration, feminist and queer theory, affect and material culture, and first-person, autobiographical documentary and memoir. She is the author of *Race under Reconstruction in German Cinema* (University of Toronto Press, 2011), co-editor of the volumes *Fascism and Neo-fascism: Critical Writings on the Radical Right* (2004) and *The Autobiographical Turn in Germanophone Documentary and Experimental Film* (2014), and guest co-editor of special issues for the journals *Transit*, *Camera Obscura*, and *Feminist German Studies*.

Since we moved to a new house three years ago, many is the time I've fretted to myself or to my spouse, "There's just too much stuff here!" I honestly don't understand how a three-bedroom bungalow in Toronto's East End has come to feel more cluttered than the two-bedroom attic of the turn-of-the-century house I previously occupied downtown for a decade, even if our move did entail merging two households. I've worked hard to become reasonably minimalist over the course of my academic career, while still conceding how much space a scholar has to occupy just in the form of bookshelves and filing cabinets. Most of

us have racked up more than our share of moves and relocations during the itinerant years of graduate study, but also amid the appointments, temporary or permanent, associated with this vocation. If we manage to settle in one place for an extended time, there's still the odd research stay or residency that involves even a temporary reconstruction of infrastructure. As a result, I've become cognizant of the need to live lightly, but I haven't always succeeded.

Frankly, it's not easy when you're in the reading business. Stuff accumulates, and much of it in the form of printed matter: books, photocopied articles, and a multitude of paperwork somehow perpetually in progress and not quite dispensable yet. Every couple of years, I'm confronted anew with the reality that paper stacks have colonized every available surface of my expansive desk, even as I stubbornly persist in gazing past them to the alluring contents on my computer screen. Once I've reached that threshold where I really can't stand the clutter anymore, I'm forced to intervene, shoveling my way through the cumulative force of recent history, reviewing each document in order to relegate what's expired in relevancy to the recycling bin and assign what's worthy of preservation a long-term resting place in my provisional and ever-evolving filing system. I never manage to fully obliterate that unwieldy third category of paperwork *in progress*, resigned instead to repeat the cycle of sorting at a later point.

But what I've resisted tackling far, far longer are twelve cartons that movers were instructed three years ago to tuck away downstairs in a back closet in the lower level of our home. Here they rested for two further years while we were in shock from the relocation and figuring out our renovation strategy. Those boxes have been accumulating since I started my MA in German back in Massachusetts over thirty years ago. Initially, they contained spiral-bound folders filled with copious class notes—materials I apparently thought I would revisit when I enrolled at the University of Minnesota. Across the years and then, decades, some boxes remained sealed shut, only to be joined by new ones filled with the growing stock of 3-ring binders I assembled for every course, fastidiously punching in the printed syllabus, a multitude of handouts, and the odd article or other relevant paperwork. My ambition in stowing these was aspirational, thinking one or another insight or epiphany buried in there might be useful someday, assuming I could recall what it was or where to locate it. With time, other artifacts hailing from the full decade spent in the Twin Cities also gathered there because I just wasn't ready to part with them.

When I first arrived at the University of Toronto seventeen years ago, I was hurtled into overdrive with a new teaching post and surviving in a perpetual present of deadlines met just in the nick of time. The cartons receded from sight, tucked in the storage unit allocated to me in the basement of my building. I felt secure knowing my link with the past wasn't really severed; it was simply contained and displaced. But since I didn't really get to downshift much post-tenure, instead reaching for fifth gear as I took on administrative responsibilities, those boxes just settled into a deep freeze. Life, it seems—whether intensified by new ambitions, by illness or loss, or by happy distractions—has a way of sweeping us along, and there's always something more compelling to tackle than sorting through cartons in the cramped windowless depths of an old building. But the moment of reckoning approached last year when my spouse, Roberto, decided to renovate the garden-level bedroom of our new home to create an open-concept space, pointedly reminding me that *those boxes* need to go elsewhere. Which they did: to the adjacent guest bathroom, stacked to the ceiling three stacks deep, including in the bathtub, and thereby impeding access to other designated uses of that room. That was fine for six months, since we have another bathroom, but as he eventually pointed out, this simply could not be a long-term solution.

This is how, one Saturday morning in Spring 2019, with the academic year winding down and large swaths of time for domestic tasks looming imminent, at least in my imagination, I found myself deciding—quite virtuously, I think—to tackle at least one box. Just to get my feet wet, or at least my hands a little dusty, and thereby prove to Roberto my good will in soon making good on my vow to pare down their contents to the bare essentials. Squeezing first past the bathroom door, which opens only partially because it's blocked by the contents behind it, and then past the first stack, I find just enough space to position both legs so as to gain the leverage needed to wrestle one heavy box from the pile in the bathtub and set it down on the closed toilet seat. I easily rip through the brittle plastic packing tape that miraculously remained attached for more than a quarter of a century and pull back the flaps to reveal some truly ancient file folders from teaching beginning German at the University of Massachusetts.

I can't seem to get past those papers. They are on mimeographed paper, and one includes charming stick figures drawn to identify body parts for basic anatomy in German. I have no idea who made the worksheet—my memory can't seem to reach that far back to that era of

distributed TA labor—but holding even that one worksheet in my hands, I’m enchanted by the dedicated attention that must have gone just into creating it. I’m also struck by the alluring simplicity of the information captured throughout the entire stack of handouts in folders with hand-scrawled labels identifying such categories as “Passive Voice,” “Dative Verbs,” “Travel”: in short, linguistic communication reduced to an illusory series of seemingly straightforward syntactical rules, universal transactions, and easy equivalencies between the sign in one language and that in another. There now appears something extraordinarily comforting in the thick purple print that the mimeograph machine creates, something emphatic and committed, unlike the endless digital text we now generate and circulate electronically, ready to revise or delete at a moment’s notice. Still clutching one of the folders, I’m transported into the past, to the cramped mailroom where the mimeograph machine was housed, first the one in Herter Hall on the Amherst campus, and then the one in Folwell Hall in Minneapolis. I can hear the soft thudding sound made with each turn of the crank, faintly audible even through closed doors, as the paper was fed through the machine and emerged slightly damp and exuding that distinctive chemical aroma of fresh ink.

On a media archaeological timeline, my graduate studies were situated at the cusp between the mimeograph and the Macintosh, coinciding with the nascent proliferation of consumer-oriented digital technology. Indeed, the very first PowerBook 100 laptop series was issued the year I enrolled in the PhD program at the University of Minnesota. I recall purchasing one, my first computer ever, and thinking it was the weightiest purchase I’d ever made, one significantly more expensive than the second-hand \$300 Nissan Sentra I’d purchased back in Massachusetts for the cross-country move. As I excavate the remainders of that era in these increasingly fragile boxes, I find myself wondering whether the dizzying spatio-temporal transformations the digital era augured may have had a hand in my sustained compulsion to memorialize the past in material artifacts—artifacts I now find mediating my sense of previous and present selves. These paper-based teaching materials I’m sifting through contrast dramatically with my contemporary classroom, where everything is posted electronically, and students read on their tablets and laptops. I’m disoriented by the recollection of an earlier version of myself in another epoch, one who enjoyed discovering the magic of teaching German, her once native tongue, even as English reigned supreme in everyday life. Now, I wrestle

with the opacity of discourse, with multivalent philosophical concepts, with the nuances that each thinker we tackle in the classroom brings to the discussion. The stakes are different, and I often feel only the most provisional sense of comprehension and clarity, as everything remains open to contestation and must be proven anew through nimble reasoning. And my curriculum is changing too quickly from year to year for me to linger long on solid ground or step into the same river twice.

Endeavoring to mentally toggle between the younger persona who once occupied my body and the one who does today, I have to concede that, while life back then felt cumbersome and confusing, I could not have anticipated how complex things could still become and how much more responsibility, loss, and hard-earned wisdom would be still heaped upon a set of human shoulders. Is this how nostalgia feels—a yearning for a purportedly simpler era? It's going to be a more arduous task to sort through these boxes than I had thought, for opening just one has confronted me with why I've retained them over the years, even unopened. Perhaps there really is a justifiable logic to this cathected relationship, for these cartons offer a portal into my past and access to various chambers of my psyche. Tactile engagement with them brings alive the past, enabling a form of time travel that reanimates my affective attachments to people, places, and events from multiple compacted micro-eras of my biography. Yet all the while, these waves of memory are also filtered through a consciousness anchored in the present, enabling a degree of critical detachment.

A week later, we receive word of a houseguest to arrive shortly as the first occupant of our newly renovated space. Roberto unceremoniously moves the boxes to the utility room across the hall but can't refrain from mentioning that they will now be usurping space he needs for his power tools. I assure him with a measure of irritation that I'll be tackling them soon (the cartons, not his tools—God forbid), and then he'll have all the *Lebensraum* he desires. When I next head downstairs to load the washing machine, I eye the reassembled stacks guiltily and try not to think about the impending foreclosure of my long enduring state of denial. The following day, I'm headed out the front door in a mad rush to reach campus early enough to print my lecture notes when Roberto mentions casually over his coffee that, after he paints the study in the afternoon, he'll be moving the boxes from the utility room into our garage. Pausing momentarily before I cross the threshold, I airily reply "Okay! See you later!" as I pull the door shut behind me and flee down the steps and into the street, sprinting to the bus stop.

That same evening, while retrieving clothes from the dryer, I notice that half the cartons have already been evacuated, like refugees in transit. One stack remains, leaning precariously at shoulder height against the foundation wall. Peering dubiously at the topmost carton, I realize it's actually one I've been seeking since our move, nagged by the anxious feeling it might have gone missing in the shuffle. Among the motley collection, it is likely most irreplaceable. I had intended to shift its contents into some easily identifiable spanking new plastic container in a brilliant color (neon pink, perhaps?) for easy visibility prior to the move, but simply never got to it. And now here it is, the carton's top flaps only partially interlocked following their turbulent passage across the decades. Crumbs of plaster and dust have fallen onto and between the flaps, having filtered through the floorboards from the room above, where the week prior, Roberto had to rip out sodden sheetrock damaged by a leaky skylight during a heavy rainstorm. I gingerly brush away the debris, peeking underneath one flap to glimpse the telltale glossy envelopes familiar from commercial photo finishing, back when people used to develop their negatives at cvs or Walmart instead of downloading files from phone to computer or directly posting them on social media. That one glimpse suffices to reassure me that thirty-plus years of photos are still there. Not that I want to or need to look at them anytime soon, but at least one material surrogate for my fading memory is still in place. Brushing the dust off my hands, I turn back to the washer, press *on*, and hurtle back upstairs.

The academic year soon winds down, and on its heels, I'm hosting a three-day conference on women's film authorship during a spate of gorgeous May weather. Too thoroughly distracted to devote further thought to the boxes, I still assure Roberto repeatedly that I'll tackle them "soon, very soon." I shudder to think of all that paper moldering in our uninsulated garage over the next Ontario winter, but am too caught up in overseeing a dizzying storm of catering arrangements, program assembly, and AV requirements to let my thoughts linger there. Regardless, the day quickly arrives when Roberto triumphantly raises the garage door open to display his handiwork. The towering piles now rest along one wall in the company of a discarded hot water heater, the lawn mower, our bicycles, and about thirty-five stacked, empty egg cartons awaiting recirculation at an Ontario family farm. It's time to get serious, I ruefully concede aloud as I scrutinize his recent efforts. And time to change storage media, he adds, helpfully noting that he spied a sale on plastic bins at Home Depot.

Pushing past my inner resistance, I target a date in my calendar and head out to the garage on an auspicious summer day, when poking around in a darkened interior won't seem quite so punishing, especially with the birdsong of robins, cardinals, and twittering sparrows offering moral encouragement. Slapping on work gloves to show I mean business, I heave open again our antiquated garage door with its weighted pulley system, letting the sunshine and warmth flood into the cool shadows. As I wrestle down a box and laboriously set it on the hot pavement of the driveway, it strikes me that this archive has so much more to tell me than is revealed in its contents: even the scraggly assortment of cartons themselves bespeak the past, many of them displaying sagging, dog-eared corners, or a crack here and there. They are cardboard, not least because in graduate school I could not have afforded those big Rubbermaid tubs that are otherwise a household standard. Instead, many of the boxes are from liquor stores, a useful source because their original bottled contents kept the interior uncontaminated and the construction was necessarily sturdy.

A more capacious box has a sheet of astro-bright green office paper still glued on one side with "UMN Press D" (defective press books?) boldly printed on it and a top flap displaying a shipping address of Washington Avenue, presumably the university bookstore in Coffman Memorial Union. Others bear the defunct Kinkos Copies logo, having in a previous life housed reams of copy paper proffering the perfect dimensions for my file folders. Proving a veritable palimpsest both of my sustained indigency and my itinerancy, most have accumulated multiple labels: one identifying contents, mostly packed in the 1990s and early 2000s (i.e., "Books: Modern German Drama"; "Dissertation Materials"; "CSCL Teaching"; "Video Cassettes"); another in the form of an assigned number the Mayflower movers required for their itemized inventory when I packed for Toronto; and finally, a locational designation, e.g., *basement*, later required by the more recent Rent-a-Son lads who hauled these to the East End.

One label catches my eye: the coloring differs from the others, and after staring in bafflement at an unfamiliar mailing address on Grand Avenue scrawled in florid blue cursive on pale purple paper, I remember that it's that of a friend from childhood who moved to the Twin Cities a few short years before I did. Alice K and I were playmates in elementary school until her family moved to a neighboring town. Unbeknownst to me, she later trained as a librarian and landed in St. Paul—a serendipity my mother animatedly relayed to me upon

bumping into Alice's mother one day at the local supermarket only months prior to my own relocation. The reconnection proved fortuitous, and Alice permitted me to ship her several boxes of books, while I temerarily steered my remaining worldly goods across the Plains in my covered (Nissan station) wagon. What a daunting decision it was for me to relocate my life to a city I had never visited before and knowing not a single soul other than Alice!

Scrutinizing the other cartons, I realize the one with the Grand Ave shipping address may be among the last that still hails from that early era, the others presumably disposed of over time. I resolve to keep using it as storage, for sentimental reasons—at least for now, I bargain with myself—knowing full well that it's not a practical choice (even if I'm actually quite impressed with the shelf life of cardboard). Evinced the ravages that everything earthly undergoes, these boxes effectively bear an indexical relationship both to that past and its very passage. Indeed, they are evidence that I ever HAD a history, stemming from an era when my days weren't so consumed with the daily ephemera of email correspondence and committee meetings to the point of having only a shred of a claim on a private life or of nurturing sustained intelligible thoughts of my own.

Today, by contrast, all the photo-worthy (if not necessarily photogenic) moments of my more recent past are captured on a series of digital cameras, their JPGs downloaded onto a computer or laptop, or currently still stored on my iPhone. Sure, they're readily available to review at any time (even if I never do), but I'm not sure I'll ever gaze upon them with the same twinge of loss and longing that a paper-based photograph seems to trigger in me, its indices of age, deducible from the type of photographic paper and tinting, reminiscent of those born on my own body over time. Original and copy have proven equally vulnerable to decomposition. The digital photograph, by contrast, remains comparatively ageless and timeless, even if my luminous HD Retina screen seems destined to be supplanted by ever closer approximations of an impossibly vivid human vision.

I realize that the source of my attachment is as much the materiality of this cargo as its intellectual content when I peruse more closely the spiral-bound notebooks filled with class notes, extensive research observations, and citations gathered while writing term papers. Tactile engagement with these brings into crystalline focus insights about my relationship to textuality, understood in the most literal sense of the *hard copy*, the yellowing cellulose densely inscribed with line upon line

of my careful, if inelegant cursive script, often color-coded to painstakingly distinguish quotations (blue) from my own earnest insights (black). Via handwriting that alternates from confident and curvaceous, to self-consciously deliberate and stiff, to clumsily jotted in haste or fatigue, these earlier efforts to record or document knowledge betray in equal measure the affective states that accompanied them. These scrawls and scribbles are the only remaining witnesses I have of the immaterial labors that transpired in ephemeral classroom discussions between interlocutors no longer attributable. They index mental connections, epiphanies, and at times, rote recording in the face of my own numb incomprehension. As I now pore through ream upon ream of notebooks, it humbles me to witness my earlier unknowingness, not least of events to come and revealed in due time; what I now read in these carefully notated chunks of discourse bespeaks a stolid faith in just carrying on, conceding that the future will unfold whether welcomed or not. My notetaking furthermore captures a learning process that is cumulative and progresses page by page. It stands in contrast to the endless lists of data files on my computer's desktop, ordered alphabetically and nested within folders, each more specialized in subcategory than the previous, yet capable of being resorted with just a few mouse clicks.

Thumbing through the pile further, I'm fascinated to discover that each colorful folder I assembled for every research or conference paper written in those years essentially constitutes a scrapbook: many contain programs from conferences, or flyers from the Guthrie Theatre and Walker Art Center for a special screening or installation. Others include an image of a new publication in a press catalogue cut out and saved as a potential lead, or cards and letters exchanged with key contacts in an era when people still relied on the postal system as a means of epistolary exchange. I even find occasional paper scraps on which I had hastily jotted an important thought or connection that came to me in the moment, retained for potential later integration into the writing process (and all too often simply forgotten or overlooked). What emerges is a collage of insights and epiphanies that fed into the project, recapitulating the whole research endeavor as tactile, filled with hues, textures, and graphical images, and marked by providential encounters with fellow travelers and inspiring source materials. What a contrast to my current solitary explorations in virtual space, haphazard associative clicks through a labyrinthine internet leaving little to no memorable trace, even as Google tracks my attention and calibrates algorithms from the

data it harvests! Not all my research today necessarily assumes such an ephemeral form, but these days little evidence lingers of the journeys I've navigated, beyond, of course, the occasional published article, which admittedly ought to suffice and is the point of the whole endeavor.

These colorful, if mildly musty folders, many seeing the light of day for the first time since their initial packing, pose a striking contrast to the digital desktop of my current iMac with its Intel Core i5 processor and 27-inch Retina display. The latter surface exudes a smooth sleekness that belies the textured, often tumultuous inner experience that grappling with language, discourse, and the formulation of phrases actually poses. Under the guise of uniform digital typeface generated as one taps away feverishly at the laptop or computer, the illusion of an informational monoculture emerges, an equivalency in priorities and affects save for the occasional color coding or red flag assigned—often in vain—to signal greater urgency or importance to specific files, which otherwise disappear into neat rows of indiscriminate electronic icons. From an archival point of view, it all becomes immaterial data *located* on a growing accumulation of hard drives amid nagging concern for the latter's imminent incompatibility in the face of continuing software updates and hardware redesign. Will I reopen old electronic files with the same nostalgia I currently bring to these notebooks? I doubt it. Projecting fifteen years into the future, I don't even know if I'll still be in possession of the by-then obsolete technology with which the files can be opened and read. In this regard, the turn to the digital archive recalls Karl Marx's earlier characterization of modernity as an experience in which "all that is solid melts into air"—or more recently, into pixelated ones and zeros.

Opening a carton labelled "Thesis Materials," I find a variety of documents that retrace a trail of research interests that I was contemplating while teaching English at the Humboldt-Universität-Berlin after passing my comprehensive exams. It appears I was stalking various film distributors and archives in search of videotapes of Fassbinder films and lesser-known titles of minority directors—films that were not in commercial distribution at that time. Each letter I composed had been painstakingly printed and retained to prompt my memory; when a lettered reply was received, it was filed for future reference as needed. There was no systematic method for tracking down film titles back then; it required a combination of tenacity, diplomacy, and just knowing the right people or hitting the right tone with those one did manage to encounter. When bootleg copies circulated among

classmates and colleagues near and far, the tales of how they were obtained became increasingly embellished with each generation of copy. By contrast, over this past decade, all Fassbinder's films have been remastered and digitized under the aegis of the Fassbinder Foundation, and many lesser-known German films have similarly appeared on DVD. The collection of sundry VHS tapes I've just unearthed in my own modest collection, now mostly available in holdings of the Media Commons at the University of Toronto, leave me feeling somewhat foolish, as if I'd squandered precious months, if not years, of my earlier graduate career chasing windmills.

Forging ahead with my excavations, I stumble upon a folder from a course on German feminist filmmakers that I enrolled with one of my thesis co-advisors, Professor Rick McCormick, who graciously signed on for that role along with Professor Arlene Teraoka. Tucked in there is a term paper I wrote, "Terms of Dismemberment in Valie Export's *Invisible Adversaries*," that registered my newfound interest in feminist film theory. I try to retroactively forgive myself the paper's burdensome loquaciousness while noting with curiosity that the ragged edged paper must have been issued on a dot-matrix printer. But what really catches my eye are Rick's comments, written in red felt-tip pen—yes, red and no, not ballpoint. I'm overcome anew with gratitude for his kind and generous feedback and find peculiar comfort in his notes in the margins and at document's end, which bespeak his own tactile engagement with these pages, resulting in an intersection of indexical traces between interlocutors. These, by turn, call to mind the countless times I knocked on his office door to find him seated at his desk, probably interrupted for the umpteenth time in the course of an afternoon while trying to mark papers with whatever provisional writing utensil happened to be on hand (evidently, a red felt-tip pen) or prepare for class with a mountain of books and articles surrounding him.

Today, I read my students' papers on the Quercus virtual learning platform and type my feedback in comment boxes that appear in the margins; anywhere there's Internet access, I could be reading their papers as could they be accessing my comments. Will they stumble across these electronic files some day in future and think nostalgically back upon their graduate career? I won't even "go there" (to use a phrase I can still hear Rick oft invoking) with regard to whether my classes will even be recalled at all. Indeed, students seldom stop by my office, since they know I will respond to their every electronic missive with much greater alacrity than would be feasible when arranging a meeting in real

time and space. Term papers, in turn, may very well just disappear into digital oblivion as the future sweeps our protégé(e)s forward in an electronic sea of discursivity, one in which the human mediators of knowledge swiftly recede into oblivion.

Digging up a three-ring binder with cardboard covers of a light azure hue that reminds me of the Minnesota sky on a sunny winter day, a harmonious feeling washes over me; this particular shade of blue is among my favorites. Inside, I find materials relating to another graduate seminar, Nineteenth-Century Women Novelists, taught by Professor Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres; these include a reaction paper I wrote, bearing her miniature but perfectly cursive handwriting carefully pencilled in the margins, offering words of encouragement, counsel, or further observations. Even while leaning towards a future dissertation on German cinema, I was captivated by the analytics set into motion in that course, which examined gendered authorship and historicized methods of reading and valuing literary forms. As I skim through an old term paper on the personal narrative form in Hedwig Dohm's *Schicksal einer Seele* it dawns on me that this course must have been one of the original sources for my later fascination with the first-person, autobiographical voice, eventually inspiring a symposium on first-person documentary, a series of scholarly articles, and an edited volume. Ruth-Ellen's persona, her personable manner of listening attentively while nodding and flashing an occasional bemused smile, was so affirming of the legitimacy of embodied knowledge gleaned through everyday experience. Her sustained engagement with women's writing through the centuries helped me to understand how, in a phrase I can still hear her uttering in her own unique cadence, "language, too, is a place of struggle," evidenced in specific forms and genres that have served across cross-sections of literary history as a means for the socially marginalized, including women, to safely explore an authorial voice under camouflage. Reading between the lines of those nineteenth century novellas, it was revelatory for me to discern how the subtle distancing between author, narrator, and protagonist afforded women writers permission to speak their mind from a place on the margins and to integrate observations gained through careful attention to the quotidian. In writing about one's own life *under separate cover*, as it were, one assumes the status of agent of and in history, not least one's own, rather than mere witness to or recipient of tropes assigned by others.

I ultimately spend several, progressively hotter and muggier afternoons faithfully returning to the garage to sit cross-legged outside on

the asphalt pavement, poring through papers while surrounded by open boxes and myriad accordion-style file folders. On one such day our friendly neighbor, David, with whom we share a mutual driveway, steps out of his house on an errand with his three small children in tow. Glancing in my direction after tucking the kids into the backseat of his SUV, he pauses to chide me sympathetically before sliding behind the steering wheel: “If you read every page, you’ll be there for weeks.” I stare thoughtfully in the direction of his white Ford as it backs out of the driveway, its reverse motion inducing in me a fleeting sensation of vection as if I’m the one moving away while looking back at the vehicle, which now pauses momentarily to shift out of reverse, wheels turning sideways to then surge forward out of our residential crescent. This uncanny admixture of stasis and movement brings to mind the mono-print *Angelus Novus* by Swiss German artist Paul Klee. It was purchased back in 1921 by cultural theorist Walter Benjamin: he read Klee’s figure as avatar of the so-called “angel of history,” swept forward by a storm blowing from paradise (whatever direction that hails from) even as his gaze was directed back upon the cumulative wreckage of the past receding from view. Benjamin’s angel at least had the forbearance to let the rubble of history settle behind him rather than try to somehow haul it along. If I’m downright obsessive-compulsive by comparison, I still share remnants of the same elegiac gaze.

In defense of my recent adventure in unboxing the past, since then completed, there’s something to be said for narrativized reflection on the whole archaeological endeavor. The domestic autoethnography it has precipitated in these pages differs from the “embalming” of the image that French critic André Bazin attributed to the process of photographic emulsion, one he understood as maintaining an indexical relation to a preserved moment in time-space. Instead, via writing, a fossilization has taken place in the resin of discourse, triggered by tactile engagement with remnants of a lived past. It has entailed thoughtful scrutiny of the memories thereby activated and my own haptic responses to these, and ensuing effort to pin down their significance from the perspective of the present. Now, viewing the nine blue Rubbermaid bins neatly stacked and newly labelled in a dedicated shelf along one side of our garage fills me with a provisional, perhaps illusory, sense that this past has been secured (at very least, from the encroachment of damp and mildew).

I trust this won’t be my final reckoning with the remaining debris of my itinerant biography, nor my final house move during this lifetime.

All the same, reflecting upon this particular stage of doing so has brought into focus how much I've already internalized that was mediated via all this accumulated parchment. Should I be compelled by circumstance to surrender my hold on these cartons in the future, I feel more assured that I have, in fact, retained at least some measure of what their contents were originally intended to inspire: namely, a certain nagging hunger for knowledge, for a philosophical, psychological, and somatic understanding of the ongoing mystery, wonder, and burden of Being, both mine and that of other sentient matter in complex cohabitation. This my many professors in graduate school imparted with dedication and each with their own unique charisma; this has stuck with me, and I don't necessarily need the contents of those boxes to convince me of that anymore (although I may need reminding). Revisiting them has nonetheless renewed my gratitude to so many people, including Dr. Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres, whose engaging teaching and scholarship have planted seeds of inspiration that continue to germinate in unexpected places, as they did in me.

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Section 2

**Feminist  
Scholarship  
Revisited**





**The contributions in this section** creatively engage with various forms and theories of feminist writing practice. The authors of the first two essays engage directly with the specific subjects of their dissertations through collage and letter/image/text, respectively, while the author of the third essay branches out from the dissertation in dialogue form. In their engagement with Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres's work and her academic persona, the authors each convey a desire for an overdue chat with their one-time mentor while meditating on and inscribing their own intellectual and professional journeys. Paying homage to Joeres's feminist writing practice of intertwining the personal and the scholarly, the essays offer close readings of the meaning of words and the struggle to understand words, contexts, and translations. In different ways, each essay ponders female friendship, creativity, and intellectual engagement and seeks to explicate the self through reading and dialogic writing.

Martina Anderson's contribution is a multi-genre reflection on the personal archive, including letters, photographs, ephemera—a scrapbook of sorts—as narratives of subjectivity that their creators use/d to write themselves into history. This reflection draws on her dissertation, *Addressing Epistolary Subjects*, archival projects taken on during graduate work in library and information science, and her recent participation in the translation of a friend's poem. The epistolary approach enables “approximations, limitations, indirect, skeptical reading” (*Respectability*, xxii), stressing the fragmented intellectual process and sharing insights on the processes of reading, writing, thinking, and negotiating ideas across time and space—and how we often navigate this terrain in collaboration with others.

In a travel narrative that blends vignettes of personal experience with inspirational quotations, Monika Moyrer shares the story of how she became a better “theorist of her own life.” Her journey aimed to reconcile a deep-seated interest in travel and feminism with academic writing. Joeres challenged Moyrer in these efforts, modeling the feminist approaches of skepticism, relentless self-critique, and increased complexity through her own work. Moyrer read Joeres's intellectual pursuits as inspiration and applied them to her feminist study of Christa

Wolf's writing and later to her dissertation on the Romanian-German author Herta Müller. Moreover, Moyrer adopts Müller's collage approach to thinking and writing for her essay, a mirror for the fragmentation of the self, as well as an aesthetic reclamation of piecing the self back together. In her academic search for insights on how the writing process can help come to terms with political violence, Moyrer's current work in the field of reconciliation and peace reflects a seamless blend of the personal and the scholarly.

A reflection on mindfulness frames the three-way imaginary dialogue on the subject of intellectual labor in Beth Ann Muellner's essay. Modeling Joeres's practice of weaving the personal with the professional, Muellner draws Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres and the poet-queen Carmen Sylva, the subject of Muellner's current book, into dialogue. Channeling her former advisor to interrogate the queen directly with pointed questions and comments, Muellner uses direct quotes from Sylva's numerous autobiographical texts, allowing Sylva to speak for herself on topics such as childbearing, child loss, infertility, women in leadership positions, and the power of writing. Like the other pieces in this section, this essay meditates upon the specific meaning and interpretation of words. In considering class via the notion of labor, Muellner's essay ultimately ponders why scholarship about a nineteenth-century queen, a subject often viewed as powerful and privileged, should be considered within the framework of intersectional feminist analysis.

The essays in this section connect through their expression and interrogation of the *how* of scholarly writing. The power of the feminist essay, as championed and modeled by Joeres, is evidenced in their attempts to push the boundaries of genre, in their claiming ownership over the ways in which categories and definitions are used and passed on. In form and content, the essays here manifest the meaning and importance of the feminist work of writing and reading.

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## Chapter 4

# On this Occasion, Seven Letters



# On this Occasion, Seven Letters

## Martina S. Anderson

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

**Martina Anderson** is Acquisitions and Appraisal Librarian at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She earned a PhD in Comparative Literature under Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres in 2000. After more than a decade working in marketing and communications in higher education, she earned an MLIS from Rutgers University. As a librarian, Anderson worked on projects at the State Library of Massachusetts and the Peabody-Essex Museum, including on a team that cataloged the library of art historian Egbert Haverkamp-Begemann, now housed at the Center for Netherlandish Art at the MFA Boston. She recently published a chapter on diversity, inclusion, and social justice in library technical services.

Es war schon, als hätt ich Wurzel gefaßt in diesem schönen Briefleben (Arnim 246).<sup>1</sup>

I took my first course with Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres in spring 1992 (“German Women Writers of the Eighteenth Century”) and completed my dissertation, *Addressing Epistolary Subjects*, in 2000. My dissertation sought to investigate ways in which the letter’s characteristics, both of form and function, contribute to defining its place in the system of genres and discourses on literature. I was fascinated by the oft-repeated announcements of the *death* of the letter (and of the epistolary novel)

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<sup>1</sup>It was as if I had taken root in this beautiful life of letters” (my trans.).

and of the letter's persistent association with women. My first encounter with this idea was in "The Writer as Re-collector," a course I took in college with Paul Holdengräber. Tacked onto the end of the edition of Gustave Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (1881) that we read was Flaubert's *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*, a short work published in 1911–13 from notes compiled by Flaubert during the 1870s, satirizing clichés ("automatic thinking") prevalent in France at the time (1850–1880).

Genre épistolaire: genre de style exclusivement réservé aux femmes (169)<sup>2</sup>

In a letter to Louise Colet in 1852, Flaubert wrote of his conception of the dictionary: "It would be the justification of *Whatever is, is right*.... After reading the book, one would be afraid to talk, for fear of using one of the phrases in it" (Barzun 3). Why, if Flaubert was already making fun of the association of women and the letter in the late nineteenth century, did the association persist? Why was the death of the letter announced repeatedly? What cultural work is/was being done here?

When I thought about what to write for this volume, I realized I wanted to write letters to the writers whose letters—real, fictionalized, and fictional—I had read and written about twenty years ago, while writing my dissertation with Ruth-Ellen. These texts have stayed by me.

*Let me begin again.*<sup>3</sup>

• • •

Liebe Pauline und Rahel,

I decided to write to the two of you together. I take pleasure in thinking of you *zusammen* on the other side of my letter. Your correspondence was so much about your being apart, but, as the reader separated from you by more than a century, I often thought of you as occupying one place/one time and me the other. I hope you are having fun together.

I am not an easy crier, but my eyes welled up with tears when I finished your correspondence—partly because I realized that Rahel

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<sup>2</sup>"Epistolary genre: genre of style exclusively reserved for women" (my trans.).

<sup>3</sup>Echoing Vuong 3.

died not long after her last letter but mostly because the correspondence was over. I had so enjoyed being a part of your world, your relationship, and had somewhat forgotten that both of you had already been dead for a good long time. Of course, you'll never read this letter.

I started my dissertation with your letters because it made sense to me to start with the *real* letters before moving on to the fictionalized and the fictional, but also because in the background of all the texts I examined are the themes of (female) friendship and isolation, creativity and intellectual engagement. Yours was such a strong example. As co-authors of a narrative and witness to each other, the (my?) friends I encountered in the letters about which I wrote were crucial to each other's understanding of themselves (and my understanding of myself?) and their (and my?) experiences. Do you know what I mean?

By your own count, Rahel, you wrote more than 10,000 letters to almost 300 correspondents. I've read that 6,000 of those letters survive (people saved them!). The correspondence I read is made up of 257 letters (92 written by Rahel to Pauline and 165 by Pauline to Rahel) between 1801 and 1833. This letter increases the correspondence *I read* to 258 letters.

Mit freundlichen Grüßen,

*Martina*

p.s. Rahel, thought you'd be amused that astronomers Freimut Börngen and Lutz Schmadel named a minor planet (5.6 km in diameter) after you on October 10, 1990.

• • •

Liebe Bettine,

You have been very much on my mind this week. I passed by a kiosk with free books at the corner of Main and Ames Street in Kendall Square in Cambridge (Massachusetts, not England). I don't always stop to look at what's available, and it's rare that I see something worth taking. But a pile of books caught my eye:



FIGURE 4.1

A total flashback to graduate school. These books were old friends (and friends of friends). I looked around quickly as if I might see who had left them. Of course, that was silly—but I felt I might recognize the person. Later I googled the name written in pencil inside the front covers—P. Conant—but my Google searches yielded no information.<sup>4</sup> Graduate school, now twenty to thirty years ago (!), was when I first read and wrote about *Die G nderode*, and there it was, stacked just one book away from *Der Schatten eines Traumes*, which I had loved reading and which inspired me to read *Die G nderode* (in between those two books was your *Briefwechsel mit Goethe*, which I never read). And there are three books by Christa Wolf, who also wrote “Ein Brief  ber die Bettine,” which follows the text of *Die G nderode* in the edition I read. What was the course that P. Conant took, I wonder?

But what fun to see these books. I’m not sure why, but I couldn’t leave *Die G nderode* and *Der Schatten* sitting there. I already own them but needed to take them to put on a shelf in my cubicle at work. Passing by the kiosk again, I saw that the rest of the books were gone, so I may have deprived someone of the joy of reading them. But it makes me happy to see them on the shelf at home and in the office. They remind me of the person I was when I first read them. Also,

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<sup>4</sup> Harnessing the power of personal connection and memory over technology, Helga Thorson made short shrift of this mystery, immediately recalling the name Peggy Conant. The Internet subsequently provided me with the information that my P. Conant works at MIT and graduated from UMass Amherst with a BA in Women’s Studies and German in the mid-1980s.

interesting to see Elizabeth Abel's *Writing and Sexual Difference* (1982) in the pile. Are people still reading this book or was P. Conant in college or graduate school around the same time I was and just now Marie Kondo-ing their books? Abel most recently—oh, I guess it's now actually almost a decade ago—wrote *Signs of the Times: The Visual Politics of Jim Crow* and edited *The Signs Reader: Women, Gender, and Scholarship* (1983)—different signs? And, wow, I just looked at the selections for *The Signs Reader*: selected from the first 30 issues of *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, the thirteen articles “[indicate] salient trends in the scholarship created since the journal's inception in 1975” (Abel and Abel 1). The contributors were Joan Kelly-Gadol, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, Fatima Mernissi, Myra Jehlen, Elaine H. Pagels, Evelyn Fox Keller, Donna Haraway, Adrienne Rich, Diane K. Lewis, Heidi Hartmann, Catharine A. MacKinnon, Judith Herman, Lisa Hirschman, and Hélène Cixous. So many significant articles, but the two that probably influenced me the most, and that I read first in college, were Adrienne Rich's “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” and Helene Cixous's “The Laugh of Medusa.” Quite a (white) list. I don't think you'd see that now (or I hope not).

And ... I'm babbling away, as I do, far from any topics that likely interest you, worlds colliding, time collapsing, sorry! I'll finish by letting you know that I have always loved (and felt kinship with you in) this passage of yours from *Die Gùnderode*:

*Im Frühjahr nahmen wir unsre Stecken und wanderten, denn wir wären als Einsiedler und sagten nicht, daß wir Mädchen wären. Du mußt Dir einen falschen Bart machen, weil Du groß bist, denn sonst glaubst's niemand, aber nur einen kleinen der Dir gut steht, und weil ich klein bin, so bin ich als Dein kleiner Bruder, da muß ich mir aber meine Haare abschneiden. – So einer Reise machen wir im Frühjahr ... (Arnim 318).<sup>5</sup>*

Mit freundlichen Grüßen,

*Martina*

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<sup>5</sup>In the spring, we will take our sticks and hike, as if we were hermits, and we won't say we are girls. You will have to make yourself a fake beard because you are tall, and otherwise nobody will believe it, but only a small one that looks good on you, and because I am small, I will be your little brother, but I will have to cut my hair. — Such a trip, we will take in the spring... ” (my trans.).

. . .

Liebe Karoline,

I just wrote to Bettine to tell her about my having seen two of her books in a free book kiosk in Kendall Square. Your *Schatten* was there, too (of course, you probably don't know that Christa Wolf edited a volume of your writing and gave it that title), and I had to take it (your book) even though I already own it. It includes letters you wrote to Gunda, Bettine's sister, and to her brother Clemens. Oh, I just googled Gunda von Savigny (née Brentano), and I had completely forgotten that Sophie von La Roche was their grandmother. Literary bloodlines. Apparently after their mother died, Gunda and her sisters—Bettina, Lulu, and Meline—went to live for some time in the Kloster der Ursulinen in Fritzlar. I have a story about cloisters to tell you, but according to the rules I set out for myself, I realize I am not supposed to be writing to you at all, since you are a character in Bettine's fictionalized version of your letter exchange. So, I have to cut this short, but wanted you to know that I still think about your writing.

Bis bald,

*Martina*

. . .

Mon cher Jacques,

I hope you are well. I was just writing to Bettine von Arnim and realized I've always meant to ask if you were referring to Bettine in *La Carte Postale*. Linda Kauffman and Gayatri Spivak both thought you were. (Having just been reminded of her book, I also wonder whether Elizabeth Abel's book was echoing your *Writing and Difference*?)

I did not know until just now (I googled you, of course) that you were born Jackie Élie Derrida and possibly named after Jackie Coogan (that's funny). You were born in 1930, four years after Walter, my partner Andrew's father, and four years before my mother. I never considered—or really even noticed— your age when I first read your

writings, but it jumped out at me as I was reading your Wikipedia entry just now.

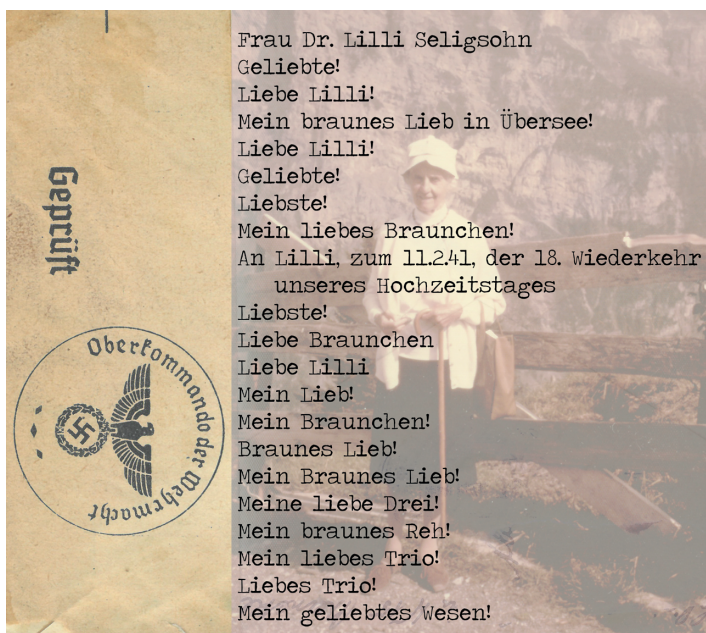


FIGURE 4.2

I've been working on the enclosed collage for some time—it's just a draft, but I'm curious what you think. The salutations are from letters written by Julius Seligsohn to his wife Lilli (Andrew's grandparents). Julius died February 28, 1942, in KZ Sachsenhausen (Lilli died in 1990 in NYC). Lilli and their two children left Germany in 1938, first to the Netherlands and then a year later to New York City. Julius wrote the letters during the time of their separation—from their home on Meinekestraße in Berlin and, after his deportation on March 18, 1941, from Sachsenhausen. It's clear from the content of the letters that Lilli was writing back, but those letters did not survive.

When you get a chance, let me know what you think.

Amitiés,

*Martina*

...

Oi très Marias,

I've thought of you a lot recently—the three of you and Mariana Alcoforado, “the Portuguese nun” (I was also recently reminded that Bettine and her sisters spent time in a convent). My parents and I recently translated the poem “Hold,” by my friend Sally Ball from English into German. It's from her recent volume *Hold Sway*. The text of the poem accompanies a limited-edition artist's book by the Czech artist Jan Vičar that was exhibited in the museum Druck 19 in Schwandorf in early 2019—and a translation of the poem was needed for the exhibit. There's a line in the poem that caused us much translation trouble, raising all kinds of questions about interpretation, authorial intention, imagery, symbolism, female isolation, female freedom, female intellect, etc., etc. I thought you'd be interested in the exchange that we had about how to translate the lines. (Sally had been reading Roy Scranton's *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization*. I've included the two lines before the lines that gave us trouble for the tiniest bit of context.)

*So many places cancel  
our sense of the dire.*

*Cloister me—  
Cloister me forward* (Ball 56–57)

And here is the email exchange (three-pronged and edited lightly to take up less space) about how we decided to translate those lines (not recorded here are the hours of talking about them on the phone).<sup>6</sup>

• • •

**From:** Martina Anderson  
**Date:** Mon, Feb 4, 10:49 PM, to Sally  
**Subject:** Title

... We have been living and breathing your poem. We have a complete translation, and we've had another German speaker read it

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<sup>6</sup> I thank Sally Ball, David Anderson, and Sigrid Anderson for granting me permission to reproduce the text of their emails.

(and approve), and I think we have just a few questions. The main one is “Cloister me.” In French and English, there is both the literal and more figurative meaning of cloister—the actual convent and the idea of secluding/shutting in/isolating/hiding. How important to you is the idea of the actual convent? We’ve struggled with this idea and disagreed and discussed, etc....

*xxoo Martina*

• • •

**From:** Sally Ball  
**Date:** Tues, Feb 5, 11:53 AM, to me  
**Subject:** Re: Title

... Cloister: what I most love here is the echo of Roethke—in “The Lost Son” there is a semi-famous line, “Snail, snail, glister me forward,”—and it will sound silly but when I wrote the first draft of the poem (not yet thinking of (or knowing I was thinking of?!) Roethke) and arrived at the cloister me line, I heard the echo of his glister me too and felt like I knew I had something.

Then I went to reread the Roethke (for I’m guessing the first time since Rael Meyerowitz’s class my senior year!), and that poem had so many chimes with what I was writing—so then the epigraph, and the worm, and I think too—some other small tonal/syntactical echoes came in.

In a German translation, I would bet precisely zero people will hear or recognize or—anything—be moved by—this glister echo (in English this moment of recognition is probably something like 0.2% ... I know that too! but I love it anyway!)

So: all to say—I doubt my favorite thing about that moment will factor into the translation at all, and I don’t think churchiness is as important as the idea of hiding oneself away from knowing the truth. The moment in the poem is basically—the rising up of the desire to see those beautiful places and believe things can’t be as bad as we know that they are, the wish to be protected from/ignorant of that knowledge and then—a hint of the future (“forward”)—and the speaker knows that seeking protection is the same as failing to protect.... xo! so much huge gratitude!

. . .

**From:** Sigrid A. Anderson  
**Date:** Wed, Feb 6, 9:16 PM, to me  
**Subject:** Re: [EXTERNAL SENDER] Fwd: Title

Hi Martina,

Well, the cloister line ...

Daddy and I vary a bit.

He is very determined ...

We'll talk. *Mammi*

. . .

**From:** Martina Anderson  
**Date:** Wed, Feb 6, 9:58 PM, to Sigrid  
**Subject:** Re: [EXTERNAL SENDER] Fwd: Title

Getting ready for bed now, but, yes, let's talk Friday or the weekend. Is Daddy committed to the idea of the cloister despite Sally's saying that she doesn't need the idea of a convent? Sally says: hide me away (could be: shield me, isolate me, seclude me.)....

:-) Love you and talk to you soon!

*Martina*

. . .

**From:** David R. Anderson  
**Date:** Wed, Feb 6, 10:17 PM, to me  
**Subject:** cloister schmoister?

Hi Martina,

We've run into a little bit of conflict, your mama and I, over "cloister" that has had fuel thrown onto the flames by Sally's hedging on really being committed to the word after all. I feel that as a translator of a poem, there is a certain commitment to the language of the poem that is mirrored by the language into which the poem is being trans-

lated. “Cloister” is a strongish word with lots of echoes, allusions, implications back through the language of literature as well as the architectural heritage of the world that is being reflected on in the poem. Cloister appears twice in two lines, and a reader of the English (and perhaps the French) might expect that it would be retained since “Kloster” is an exact German cognate without ancillary meanings.

But apparently it doesn’t have to be. At least not in the German translation. (I concede entirely that “Stels” should be left without a built-in gloss. The mystery of language ought not be minimized. T. S. Eliot & Ezra Pound included untranslated German, Chinese, Italian in their poems).

So I am stepping out at this point and allowing you, Sally, and Sigrid to decide.

Just so you know.

*Daddy, the Stubborn.*

• • •

**From: Martina Anderson**

**Date: Wed, Feb 6, 11:01 PM, to David**

**Subject: Re: cloister schmoister?**

I am really headed to bed but wanted to say that I do understand your point, and it is not always that one has the chance to talk to the poet when doing a translation.

But I also very much believe that not everyone has the same sense of words. You (David) hear and use words very differently than someone else might/does. I personally don’t think it makes sense to insist on the literary history of a word when the poet herself was not reaching for that history. I think that Sally would very much appreciate your reading of the poem; she’d be interested to hear what you have seen there—but, as I think you know, it’s not the only thing to see there. Your interpretation is your interpretation, and you are seeing something that the poet did not (consciously at least) build—that is part of the mysterious nature of language, of poetry. I know that many many pages have been written about just these questions—where/with whom does meaning lie, what does the author control, etc. etc. I respect your desire/decision to step away,

and I hope that I haven't caused you and Mammi to argue in ways that don't make sense.

I do have to say that I also trust your sense of words to help us find one that contains the other elements of the word "cloister" that Sally was reaching for—and that other readers of the poem feel more strongly than "convent." She used the word also (and strongly) because it echoes Glister for her, but we aren't going to capture that (!). You may think it's odd that Glister is a stronger association and drove her choice of the word more than the historical and literary allusions of the word cloister ... but in this case, we actually know that to be the case. And I think we owe it to the poem/poet to lean in the direction of what she says is important, not what is important to our own interpretation of her poem.

She is very much letting us translate as we think is best—and knows that we can't and won't produce a text that has the same meaning as her poem in English. I would hate for you to abandon the poem and your co-translators at such a late point. Stubbornness is a family trait, so I'll let you be if that's really what you want (but I hope you'll come around?).

Love you and talk to you soon,

*Martina*

• • •

**From: David R. Anderson**  
**Date: Thu, Feb 7, 11:10 AM, to me**  
**Subject: kloster**

Do Googleimages for "Kloster Wienhausen"—I'm not sure whether you ever went with us to this cloister—still in operation—outside of Celle. We discovered it fairly late into our trips, very likely post 1984 with Denny. I am certain that its effect on me overpowers my ability to deal in the abstraction with the word.

*Daddy*



FIGURE 4.3

• • •

**From:** David R. Anderson  
**Date:** Thu, Feb 7, 12:20 PM, to me  
**Subject:** Cast your glimmers on this!

Have you seen the image that accompanies “Hold” on the Scoundrel Time website (<https://scoundreltime.com/hold>)? It could be Wienhausen! Didi pointed the way (he went right to this site—which we hadn’t done. *Deutsche Gründlichkeit*) while he was talking with Mami on the phone just now. She may well not have chosen the illustration—but whoever did was reading the lines very much as I do.

• • •

**From:** Sigrid A. Anderson  
**Date:** Thu, Feb 7, 12:38 PM, to me  
**Subject:** Re: [EXTERNAL SENDER] Re: cloister schmoister?

Had a long talk with Didi.

Of course, he asked abt the author, then as we talked, he googled her. So Didi had a few answers re usage of words. Also suggested we could be creative and use *einklostern*. He said children are often very creative that way. Stels bikes are totally unknown in Germany. He knew nothing abt the Russian/Norwegian border crossing but googled that right away and saw the *aufgehäuften Räder*.

Recyclables is back in. Etc etc. *Mammi*

• • •

**From:** Martina Anderson  
**Date:** Thu, Feb 7, 3:31 PM, to David  
**Subject:** Re: Cast your glimmers on this

Point taken. And it's a good one. It means that the artist took the words in a more literal way than Sally may have meant, but that still gives us a context that we may want to take into account. I still think the more figurative translation is legitimate (even given the image), but given the image, I feel differently about the text—even if the text will also exist separate from the images.

And it's funny that you mention this point because I was talking to work colleagues about the opposing views about the translation this morning and someone asked about the images from the artist's book—which I realized we haven't seen! And we didn't think about (until now)!

What do you think of Didi's suggestion of *einklostern*?

*xxoo Martina*

• • •

**From:** David R. Anderson  
**Date:** Thu, Feb 7, 7:29 PM, to me  
**Subject:** Re: Cast your glimmers on this

I love *einklostern*: *kloster mich ein / von jetzt an kloster mich ein*.

• • •

**From:** David R. Anderson  
**Thu, Feb 7, 2019, 7:44 PM, to me, Sigrid**  
**Subject:** The prize award statement for “Hold”

In celebration of Scoundrel Time’s second anniversary, our editorial team is excited to announce the winners of our second annual Editors’ Choice Awards. Sally Ball’s “Hold” is the award-winner in poetry. Here is what Poetry Editor Daisy Fried says about “Hold”:

*Sally Ball’s “Hold” is a rigorous, gorgeous, personal and political examination of climate change. Part prayer, part song, part analysis, part fragments of narrative, the poem has been made into a limited-edition artist’s book by the Czech artist Jan Vičar. For more information, [www.saralouiseball.com](http://www.saralouiseball.com)*

This is the statement from the blurb on awarding the prize, which you’ve likely also seen. n.b. “Part prayer ...”

• • •

**From:** Martina Anderson  
**Date:** Feb 7, 9:31 PM, to David  
**Subject:** Re: The prize award statement for “Hold”

I already \*said\* I understand your point/your reading! I never doubted that it was legitimate to read the poem in the way you are reading it. I think it makes sense to lean in the direction of the poet’s intent since we happen to know it. But I think our disagreement has taken us to a better solution, so it’s good that we all stuck to our guns. It can be good (I believe) to think about how and why other people may read the same words differently and yet still meaningfully and with good reason. We are so close to done!

*Martina*

There you have it. Crisis of the twenty-first century averted. Power in/to the cloister.

Saudações cordiais,

*Martina*

• • •

Salut Roland!

I write with the hope that you are well. I've recently been pondering your words about the letter from *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*:

*[J]e pense à vous.*

*Q'est-ce que ça veut dire, « penser à quelqu'un »? Ça veut dire: l'oublier (sans oubli, pas de vie possible) et se réveiller souvent de cet oubli. Beaucoup de choses, par association, te ramènent dans mon discours. « Penser à toi » ne veut rien dire d'autre que cette métonymie. Car, en soi, cette pensée est vide: je ne te pense pas; simplement, je te fais revenir (à proportion même que je t'oublie). C'est cette forme (ce rythme) que j'appelle « pensée »: je n'ai rien à te dire, sinon que ce rien, c'est à toi que je le dis (Barthes, *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* 187).<sup>7</sup>*

I have been thinking about letters and photographs as objects— letters by and photographs of people we know and those by and of people we don't, especially old family letters and photographs— objects to which we have a close connection, but one made distant by time. I am the keeper of several photo albums that belonged to my partner's grandmother's sister, Hilde Werthauer, a Berlin Jew who fled Germany in 1940—traveling via the Trans-Siberian Railway to Japan and arriving in the U.S. that same year.

In 2012, my final project for a Digital Libraries class was a design proposal for a digital collection entitled “The Photographs of Hilde Werthauer (1902–1992).” The primary purpose of the digital collection was “to provide visual evidence of aspects of Jewish life, in particular the experience of young adults among Berlin's Jewish elite, before the rise of the Nazi regime (although later photographs would also be included in the collection)” (Anderson, “Design Proposal for a Digital Library,” 1). The collection consisted of five photograph albums, approximately 100 loose photographs, and a box in which many of the photographs were stored (a small shipping box from Haeberlein-

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<sup>7</sup>“I am thinking of you./What does ‘thinking of you’ mean? It means: forgetting ‘you’ (without forgetting, life itself is not possible) and frequently waking out of that forgetfulness. Many things, by association, bring you back into my discourse. ‘Thinking of you’ means precisely this metonymy. For, in itself, such thinking is blank: I do not think you; I simply make you recur (to the very degree that I forget you). It is this form (this rhythm) which I call ‘thought’: I have nothing to tell you, save that it is to you that I tell this nothing” (Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse* 157).

Metzger A. G. Nürnberg, which originally contained Lebkuchen, sent from Germany to New York City in December 1958).

In my proposal, I grappled with the question of why this collection of photographs (and a box) should be preserved and made accessible to a wider audience. Hilde Werthauer was an ordinary person whose photographs show what is in many ways an unremarkable life. On the one hand, I did not intend to present these photographs in any way as representative of all Jews—Hilde Werthauer was, as the photographs suggest, a highly assimilated, upper-class German Jew; she was not “typical.” However, presented out of context, the photographs quickly take on a representative status—if not for all German Jews, then at least for upper-class, assimilated Jews. The historical record and the identities that emanate from it are made up of the material that has survived, whether by chance or by intentional selection.



FIGURE 4.4



*Handwritten text in German script, likely names of the women in the kitchen above.*



*Handwritten text in German script, likely the name of the dining room above.*

FIGURE 4.5



FIGURE 4.6

Your words again, Roland: “The Photograph does not necessarily say *what is no longer*, but only and for certain *what has been*” (Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 85).

*Je pense à vous.*

I look for you, for me, in letters and photographs. I search for you in photographs taken by people I don't know, of people I don't know. I want, I seek, to recognize you. I imagine you've written the letters I read by people I don't know to people I don't know. I imagine you've addressed these letters to me; do they address me? Will you appear to me?

*I am writing to reach you.*<sup>8</sup>

Bisouxx,

*Martina*

...

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<sup>8</sup>Echoing Vuong 3.

Dear Ana,

Over the twenty years since I wrote about *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, I have often thought of Ruth-Ellen's repeated question to me about the role of lesbianism in your letters. At the time, I was not able to articulate the way in which sexuality was *inextricably* bound into the text's epistolarity. Female friendship, female relationships, yes, but sexuality, and lesbianism specifically, no. I felt that I could write about the role of lesbianism or sexuality in the text, but it did not shed light for me on its epistolarity, and I felt it was impractical to imagine that I could include all aspects of the text in my analysis. At the time, I asked myself repeatedly: what difference does it make for the aspects of the text that *I have chosen* to write about? (and I kept coming up empty).

Years and years later, as Kimberlé Crenshaw's term intersectionality has become part of everyday vocabulary (her original article was published the year I graduated from college), I have come to understand Ruth-Ellen's point. Crenshaw says, "Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It's not simply that there's a race problem here, a gender problem here and a class or LGBTQ problem there" ("Kimberlé Crenshaw on Intersectionality").

You see, twenty years ago, I wrote about the way I saw you using "the characteristics of the letter form to break silence, to understand experience collectively (as a woman and a Chicana), to expose the systems of genre and gender and of race/ethnicity/nation that subordinate and complicate" Teresa, your main character (Anderson, *Addressing Epistolary Subjects* 68). Sexuality certainly feels like a glaring omission from where I stand now. Mostly this realization makes me smile, a bit sheepishly. Here's to dwelling on the past!

All the best,

*Martina*

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## Chapter 5

# Ein (unvollständiger) Reisebericht



# Ein (unvollständiger) Reisebericht

## Monika Moyrer

Action Reconciliation for Peace

**Monika Moyrer** is the US program director of Action Reconciliation Service for Peace (ARSP) in Philadelphia. She received her PhD in German from the University of Minnesota and has published on Herta Müller, the FrauenMediaTurm, and Robert K. Eissler. Before joining ARSP she taught German language and literature at different colleges and universities in the US, most recently at Millersville University in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

Der Duden definiert „reflektieren“ als „(sich) eingehend mit jemandem, etwas beschäftigen.“ In diesem Essay geht es darum, „lange, gründlich, tief [dar]über ... nach[zu]denken“ (Duden), wie feministisches Denken sich in meinem Leben und Arbeiten in Bezug zu Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres' Schriften entwickelt hat. Normalerweise würde ich das Essay auf Englisch schreiben, denn das entspricht den Konventionen des (amerikanischen) akademischen Diskurses, in dem ich mich lange bewegt habe. Durch Englisch gehöre ich dazu.... Aber nur durch Nachdenken in meiner Muttersprache, die mir vertraut ist, geht es letztlich, die Beziehungen zu meiner Doktormutter ehrlich und intensiv zu erforschen. Außerdem ging es in meinem Leben, Denken und Schreiben immer um grundlegende (Um-)Brüche, so dass auch diese Abweichung eine logische Möglichkeit bietet, den Text von einer neuen Seite zu betrachten.

Academic work is inherently conservative inasmuch as it seeks, first, to fulfill the relatively narrow and policed goals

and interests of a given discipline or profession ... intellectual work, in contrast, is relentlessly critical, self-critical, and potentially revolutionary, for it aims to critique, change, and even destroy institutions, disciplines, and professions that rationalize exploitation, inequality, and injustice. (Olson and Worsham 7)

Wenn ich in knappen Worten erklären soll, was ich gelernt habe, dann ist es die Hinwendung vom akademischen zum intellektuellen Arbeiten. Ruth-Ellens schreibende Entwicklung von der Monografie über Louise Otto-Peters und den Anfängen der deutschen Frauenbewegung bis zu ihrem Buch *Respectability and Deviance*—das zu Recht als intellektuelle Autobiografie (Stimpson xvii) gelesen worden ist—ist bemerkenswert. Ihre Entwicklung zeigt, wie Denken und Schreiben wahrhaft die Grenzen des literaturwissenschaftlichen Arbeitens sprengen kann. Sie offenbart aber auch das Risiko feministischen Arbeitens: durch authentisches Ringen mit den Quellen und Texten entsteht ein skeptischer Text, der einen vielschichtigen Denkprozess offenlegt und sich somit weit weg vom akademischen Arbeiten positioniert. Ich habe Ruth-Ellens Reflektionen daher als Inspiration und Mahnung gelesen, schonungslos zu arbeiten, Schubladen zu vermeiden und mein Denken stets frisch zu halten. Das will ich auf den nächsten Seiten so ehrlich wie möglich tun.

... how contemporary feminist writers and theorists have moved beyond categories of binary opposition toward more differentiated views of women's multiple social realities (Clark, Joeres, and Sprengnether 9)

In meinem ersten Frühjahr an der Universität von Minnesota im Jahr 2002 schrieb ich mich in einen interdisziplinären Kurs über *Gender* ein, den Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres, Mary Jo Maynes, Myra Marx Ferree und Ute Frevert unterrichteten. Ich war zutiefst dankbar, an einem experimentellen Kurs teilzunehmen und einer Vielzahl von Ideen aus Geschichte, Soziologie, Literatur ausgesetzt zu sein. Dieser Kurs war auch in einer anderen Beziehung wegweisend. Hier lernte ich meine beste Freundin kennen. Als sie mich spontan einlud, ihre Familie zu besuchen, nahm ich an und reiste im folgenden Sommer nach Peru, um die touristischen Highlights kennenzulernen. Bis heute erinnere ich mich an das Gefühl, im Morgengrauen, umgeben von einem

majestätischen Panorama auf dem Machu Picchu zu stehen. Magisch. Am eindrücklichsten sind mir jedoch die Begegnungen mit Frauen im Sinn geblieben, die im Bereich Gender und Entwicklung arbeiteten und über ihre Projekte und ihr Leben sprachen. Selbstverständlich würde ich zwei Jahre später zurückkehren, um eine mögliche Zusammenarbeit mit dem *Centro de la Mujer Peruana Flora Tristan* auszuloten, die leider nicht zustande kam. Trotzdem war es ein Gewinn, peruanische Frauen—wie Virginia Vargas, Gründerin des oben genannten Frauenzentrums in Lima und international angesehene lateinamerikanische Feministin—kennen zu lernen und Projekte zu besuchen, die sich konkret mit reproduktiven Rechten, Sexualität, häuslicher Gewalt, Armut, Gesundheit und *Empowerment* beschäftigen. Ein Projektbesuch, an den ich mich noch gut erinnere, war beim Gesundheitszentrum in Piura. Soledad, die Projektkoordinatorin, machte mit mir einen Rundgang und erklärte, dass sich das Zentrum auf reproduktive Gesundheit, Mütter und allgemeine oder präventive sexuelle Gesundheit konzentriert. Außerdem hatte ich die Gelegenheit, die *Comedores Populares* (öffentliche Kantinen) des Viertels zu besuchen, in denen Frauen aus dem Stadtteil für die Zubereitung eines Essens zuständig waren, das sie günstig an die Bewohner des Viertels verkauften (ein staatliches Programm, das zusammen mit *Vaso de Leche* zur Bekämpfung von Unterernährung eingerichtet wurde). Es war schön, zu sehen, dass es auf lokaler Ebene konkrete Ansätze gibt, die von Frauen für Frauen bestimmt waren.

Im Nachhinein kann ich sagen, dass meine Besuche in Lima und Piura mein Bewusstsein dafür geschärft haben, dass feministischer Aktivismus direkt mit den vielfältigen Lebensrealitäten von Frauen in Berührung kommen muss. Ich habe besser verstanden, wie eng soziale und ökonomische Ungleichheit, Zugang zu einer preiswerten Gesundheitsversorgung, Bildungsprivilegien und Geschlecht zusammenhängen und bei der Lösung von sozialen Problemen zusammen gedacht werden müssen. Ich habe gelernt, eine für mein Verständnis andere Art von feministischer Arbeit zu respektieren. Dennoch: Reisen, Interviews, feministische Projektbesuche sind schön und gut, waren aber letztendlich nicht *nützlich* für mein damaliges Hauptfach. Die Hauptfrage, die sich beim Reisen immer wieder herauskristallisierte, lautete: wie bringe ich eine starke feministische Entschlossenheit offen und deutlich in meine eigene Forschung ein, ohne eine distanzierte Kritikerinnenrolle einzunehmen? Wie beziehe ich bei meiner Analyse und Interpretation von literarischen Texten die komplizierten

„multiplen sozialen Realitäten“ (meine Übersetzung; Clark, Joeres, and Sprengnether 9) von Frauen ein? Wie folge ich dem Beispiel von Ruth-Ellen, der die Verbindung von Lebenswelt und rigorosem intellektuellem Arbeiten ein Leben lang am Herzen lag?

Approximations, limitations, indirect, skeptical readings  
and interpretations (Joeres, *Respectability* xxiii)

Der Kurs, von dem ich vorher sprach, passierte per Video simultan auf zwei Campus. Die Texte und Diskussionen waren dermaßen interdisziplinär, dass einem der Kopf rauschte. Und dennoch war dieses Seminar für mein feministisches Denken konstitutiv: ich schrieb, recherchierte und warf mich mit Elan ins akademische Geschehen. Heraus kam ein Essay über Christa Wolfs Roman *Nachdenken über Christa T.*, über das ich berichten möchte. Das Essay untersucht weibliche Subjektivität im Sozialismus. Es geht auch um die Frage, wie das Schreiben über die Lebenswelt von Frauen mit einer ideologisch vorgefertigten Schreibweise in Einklang zu bringen ist. Es ging mir darum, wie man *Realität* in Erzählungen oder fiktionalen Texten untersucht, wenn eine bestimmte ideologische Erwartungshaltung im Raum steht. Ich war fasziniert davon, wie Christa Wolf ihre eigene feministische Lösung zu dieser Frage anbot, indem sie auf der Wertigkeit der weiblichen Subjektivität bestand. Wolf hatte am Bitterfelder Weg Programm teilgenommen, bei dem Intellektuelle von der DDR-Regierung ermutigt worden waren, die Welt der Produktion und der Arbeiter unmittelbar zu erleben und Romane zu schreiben, die auf diesen Erfahrungen aufbauen. Natürlich war die Idee der Ideologie des sozialistischen Realismus untergeordnet und es wurde erwartet, dass Literatur die soziale Realität widerspiegeln (und das auf eine Weise, wie der Staat sie definierte) und nicht auf die als bürgerlich sentimental, individuell oder subjektiv empfundenen Probleme eingehen soll.

Angesichts dieser Prämissen muss Christa Wolfs Versuch, die konstruierte Fiktion des sozialistischen Realismus abzulehnen, indem sie auf Persönliches zurückgreift und das narrative Prinzip der *subjektiven Authentizität* verwendet, als mutiger Versuch gelesen werden. Ihr Roman *Nachdenken über Christa T.* (1968) wurde zu einem Wendepunkt in der DDR-Literatur, weil er eine Alternative zu den vorherrschenden Lehren darstellte. Wolf beanspruchte ausdrücklich das Recht auf Subjektivität, das sie in einem humanistischen Sozialismus verwirklicht sah, und forderte das sozialistisch-patriar-

chalische Denken heraus. In „Selbstversuch“ (1973) kritisiert sie mutig die marxistisch-leninistische Partei und die patriarchalischen Formen, die sich aus einer von Männern dominierten Führung entwickelten. Das Stück verbindet eine utopische Vision mit einer Kritik an Konformismus, Karrierismus, Bürokratisierung und Technokratie. Weibliche Erfahrung wird als eine Alternative zur Aneignung der Welt gesehen. Mit ihrer radikalen Kritik am sozialistischen Patriarchat versucht Wolf eine neue und autonome Dimension der weiblichen Subjektivität als Beitrag der Frau zur Erneuerung der DDR einzufügen.

Für mich war es spannend zu sehen, wie Wolf nachdenkt—der Titel lautet schließlich „Nachdenken über Christa T.“—indem sie die Handlungen ihrer Freundin nachvollzieht (also rational daran herangeht) und gleichzeitig Trauer- und Gedächtnisarbeit leistet. Was mich bei Christa Wolf damals und heute fasziniert, ist die subjektive Herangehensweise, die die Leserinnen auffordert, Lebensereignisse, Urteile, Überlegungen und Interpretationen selbst zusammenzuführen. Bei näherer Betrachtung stelle ich fest, dass die Gebrochenheit der Form, das nichtlineare und fragmentarische Denken bereits damals ein Thema war, mit dem ich mich identifizieren konnte. Es ist von dem Moment an zu einem Schwerpunkt meiner Arbeit und meines Selbstverständnisses geworden. Das würde sich in meiner Begeisterung für Collage als Form, für Risse und Brüche in Lebensentwürfen und vor allem für diasporische Identität zeigen.

Damals war ich daran interessiert herauszufinden, wie feministisch diese Schreibweise bewertet wird. Ich wurde nicht enttäuscht. Literaturkritikerinnen sahen ebenso, dass Wolfs Schreibstil zutiefst feministisch ist, weil die prominente DDR-Autorin sich der selbstunterbrechenden Kommunikationsmethode bedient, um eine herrschaftsfreie Beziehung auszuloten. Durch den fragmentarischen Stil der subjektiven Aneignung gelang es Wolf, Spuren einer sporadischen und unvollständigen Beziehung in den Vordergrund zu stellen und kein vollständiges Bild anzubieten.

Wolfs offen feministische Haltung ist bemerkenswert. Sie beruft sich auf ihre eigene Subjektivität und bettet die Kritik an Christa T.s Tod—die an einer Krankheit gestorben ist, die der Madame Bovarys ähnelt, weil die sozialistische Geschlechtsidentität keine Selbstentwicklung zulässt—in ihre damalige sozialistische Zeit ein, um sie von innen heraus zu verbessern.

I have gone from the joyful and fairly unproblematic task of rediscovering women writers to the far more skeptical, dubious, ambivalent work of thinking about those writers from a critical vantage point that is marked by the increasing complexity of feminist thought, the pessimism of postmodernism, and my own broadening interests.  
(Joeres, *Respectability* xx)

*Fremdheit* und *Sich-nicht-zu-Hause* fühlen ebenso wie *Mehrsprachigkeit* und *Grenzüberschreitung* haben mich seither stetig begleitet. So ist es keine Überraschung, dass ich sie auch bei derjenigen Autorin vorfand, über die ich im Detail, unter Ruth-Ellens Anleitung, forschte und schrieb. Bemerkenswert ist dabei, dass auch bei mir die Entwicklung ähnlich wie in Ruth-Ellens eloquentem Zitat ausgedrückt verlief. Bei Christa Wolf war der feministische Bezug für mich analysier- und darstellbar. Ich steckte nicht *drin*, sondern konnte ihn von außen kühl analysieren. Bei Herta Müller, der Protagonistin meiner Dissertation, weniger. Es war mühsam. Müller ist eine spröde Autorin, die sich Labels widersetzt. Auch dem feministischen.

Das liegt zum einen daran, dass Müller erst seit Ende der 1980er Jahre aus der Sicht einer anerkannten Autorin schreibt. Ihre Bücher und Geschichten davor, die in den siebziger und frühen achtziger Jahren spielen, als sie (noch) nicht berühmt war, können als radikale Schriften gelesen werden, die eng verknüpft sind mit einer existentiellen Überlebenssituation. In einem Interview mit der rumänisch-deutschen Journalistin Annemarie Schuller, das 1984 in Rumänien veröffentlicht wurde, spricht sie über die Bedeutung ihrer weiblichen Figuren, verneint jedoch, dass das Leben von Frauen schwieriger sei als das von Männern. Darin unterstreicht Müller die Wichtigkeit einer subjektiven Geschichte und betont stattdessen die Kräfte, denen diese Frau (in diesem Fall Inge) unterworfen ist. Inge passe, sagt Müller der Journalistin, nicht in die Gesellschaft, sie passe aber auch nicht in ihre eigene Geschichte. Schließlich verwehrt sich Müller der subjektiv-emphatischen Betrachtung, die Wolf als Annäherung an Christa T. wählte, wenn sie sagt, sie schreibe kein Buch über Inge, sondern sie schreibe immer nur einzelne, unabgeschlossene Texte (Schuller 121).

Für Müller ist es zwar, wie für Wolf, auch wichtig, über Frauen zu schreiben, die Außenseiterinnen sind. Im Unterschied zu Wolfs Christa T., die nicht in ihre sozialistische Gesellschaft passt und an der Gesellschaft zugrunde geht, schreibt Müller über Frauenfiguren, die

sich selbst fremd sind. Diese Müllerschen Frauenfiguren scheitern in der Selbsterkenntnis, weil sie von außen Kräften, Situationen oder Bedrohungen ausgesetzt sind, die ihre Selbsterkenntnis stören. Dieses *Sich-selbst-fremd-sein* resultiert in fehlender Introspektion, die dann auch nicht von außen gedeutet werden kann. So kommt es, dass ich selbst als Interpretin oft ratlos danebenstand und die Texte nur schwer mit meinem vorherigen Raster deuten konnte.

Wenn Müller in ihren Texten über weibliche Hauptfiguren schreibt, geschieht das—so wie bei Wolf—durch Fragmente, die sich dieser Figur nähern, sie aber niemals *begreifen*. Ihre weiblichen Figuren sind *autofiktional*: im Unterschied zu Wolf, die sich ihrer Freundin/Hauptfigur nähert und versucht, Christa T. zu verstehen, steckt Müllers Erzählerin tief in den weiblichen Figuren drin, die sie porträtiert. Es gibt für die Erzählerin keine sichere Entfernung, keine Abgrenzung, sondern sie befindet sich mittendrin in den verstörenden Geschichten. Das produziert wiederum Fragmentarisches. Außerdem überlappt das Biografische mit dem Ästhetischen und mir als Interpretin bleibt kein einführender Ansatz, mit dem ich mich der Interpretation nähern kann.

So nehmen die erklärenden Selbstaussagen der Autorin Müller eine zentrale Rolle in der Deutung ein. Zum Beispiel wenn sie erzählt, wie sie aus dem Dorf in die Stadt kam und keinen Kontakt zu den Stadtbewohnern aufnehmen konnte. Es blieb ihr das Schreiben als Kommunikationsersatz. Sie enthüllt, dass sie ihre Kindheit durcharbeiten musste, um eine Stimme, eine Sprache zu finden. Unter Bedingungen der Isolation, weil die Erfahrungen aus dem Dorf keinen unmittelbaren Kontakt mit den Stadtbewohnern zulassen, ist Schreiben ihr Zugang zu sich selbst. Müllers Art, sich mit Erfahrungen, Erinnerungen und Beobachtungen auseinanderzusetzen, ist daher ästhetischer Natur und geschieht oft durch Sprache.

I cannot maintain a position as removed academic feminist critic looking at past lives and thoughts as if under a microscope, and report what I see in an assertion of my belief in my ability to read correctly. (Joeres, *Respectability* xxii)

Für die Autorin Müller wird das Genre der Collage zum künstlerischen und persönlichen Instrument, das einen logischen inneren Zusammenhang zu ihrem Denken aufweist. Wie im vorherigen Abschnitt erläutert, spricht die Autorin selbst, als sie noch in Rumänien

wohnt, von der sprachlosen Kindheit und dem vorsichtigen Prozess der Selbsterkenntnis durch Sprache. Diese wird verstärkt unter dem direkten Eindruck der Überwachung durch die Geheimpolizei. In diesem Kontext benutzt Müller Collage als Metapher für ihren inneren Zustand, als existentielle Grundhaltung, in dem sich Fragmente von Gefühlen, Wahrnehmungen und Empfindungen ungeordnet zusammenfinden, und folgert: „Es ist eine Collage in mir geworden“ (Henke 13).

Was ich an Müller schätze, ist, dass sie mit ihrem Bild der inneren Collage an eine der grundlegenden Erfahrungen der Moderne anknüpft. Es geht um die Verbildlichung der Zerrissenheit des Subjektes, der Spiegelung der Heterogenität der Lebensumstände, sowie des bruchstückhaften Sinnzusammenhangs. Das ist eine Erfahrung, die sie nicht als singuläres Individuum macht, sondern die von Vielen erfahren worden ist. Im Unterschied zu modernen Vorbildern geht es Herta Müller bei ihrem Bild der inneren Collage nicht um die tiefenpsychologische Ebene, das Unbewusste oder die *écriture automatique* der Surrealisten, sondern um das Zurücknehmen ihrer Autorschaft, das konstruktivistische Prinzip der Assemblage und Montage sowie das Primat der Dinge. In der Collagearbeit nehmen einzelne Dinge und Wörter eine besondere Bedeutung an und verbinden sich auf ihre Weise ohne Zutun der Autorin.

Zum ersten Mal thematisiert Herta Müller Collage in künstlerisch-handwerklicher Weise in *Reisende auf einem Bein* (1989). Es ist die Abhandlung einer Frau, Irene, die sich im angekommenen Land nicht integrieren kann. Irene schneidet zuerst Fotos aus Zeitungen aus und klebt sie auf Packpapier. Dieses Collagieren, meine ich, spiegelt zum einen den entfremdeten Zustand der Hauptfigur. Zum zweiten erscheint für die Emigrantin Irene schneiden als geeignete Möglichkeit, sich ihre neue Wirklichkeit zu erschließen. Collage versetzt sie in die Lage, Mitgebrachtes und Neues nebeneinander zu stellen, so dass ungewöhnliche Zusammenhänge (*Gegensätze*) entstehen, die das Heterogene und Fremde nicht überdecken. Kleben erscheint in dieser Perspektive als gebrochener Spiegel, als Artikulation der Annäherung an die neue Umgebung, die sie sich durch Zusammenstückeln aneignet.

Die Bruchstückhaftigkeit der einzelnen Collageteile interpretiere ich auch als Absage an eine mono-linguale und mono-kulturelle Wahrnehmung, welche von Einwanderern Anpassung in einer bestimmten Form erwartet. Irene stellt dieser Erwartung zum einen ihre eigene Wahrnehmung entgegen, zum anderen fragmentiert und entfremdet sie die vorhandenen bundesdeutschen Zeitungsausschnitte.

Signifikant ist, dass Irene die deutsche Sprache—als Rumänien-deutsche—bereits mitbringt, denn sie versteht die Buchstaben und Laute, aber dass sie die in der bundesdeutschen Gesellschaft gesprochene und dort verankerten Ausdrücke der deutschen Sprache nicht kennt. Sie sucht sich deshalb aus den bundesdeutschen Zeitungen und Zeitschriften Sprachsplitter und Bildfetzen aus, die sie ansprechen.

Wie Herta Müller später über ihre Collagen denkt ist insofern relevant, als es eine Entwicklung zeigt, die mich aus dem am Anfang erfahrenen Interpretationsdilemma befreit hat. Ihr Schreiben als Prozess zu verstehen und Collage als handwerkliches Mittel UND ästhetische und künstlerische Art sich auszudrücken, war ungemein befreiend. So wie Müller sich geschickter und cleverer ausdrückte, konnte auch ich präziser formulieren. Für mich war das Essay *Der König verneigt sich und tötet* (2003) ein Aha-Erlebnis, denn hier nimmt sie—in besonders kluger Weise—eine Genealogie ihrer Poetik anhand der Genese der Collage vor. Von diesem Standpunkt aus versteht Müller Collage nicht mehr allein als inneren Prozess, bildliche Botschaft oder Spiegel der verwundeten Figur Irene, sondern setzt diese als bewusstes Instrument ein. Zum Beispiel montiert sie Collagegedichte in ihr Essay hinein, um die ambivalente Funktion der Collage zu demonstrieren: den inneren Zusammenhang zur Idee der Collage und den Kontrapunkt dazu, die Unterbrechung einer linearen, chronologischen Erzählweise durch das Collagegedicht. Damit erscheint Collage nicht mehr nur als äußere Doppelung der inneren Sehweise, sondern als strategisches ästhetisches Stilmittel der Autorin Herta Müller. Das zu erkennen, war für mich persönlich ein Durchbruch. Ab hier konnte ich wieder über sie schreiben, bruchstückhaft zwar, aber mit einer neu entwickelten Stimme.

Ich entdeckte auch den Vorteil des Klebens von Collagen. Im Gegensatz zum mühsamen Schreiben (was ich jetzt auch so erlebe) erlaubt das Collagieren *Leichtigkeit*, außerhalb ihrer Selbst zu agieren. Es fällt Müller leichter, Collagen zu kleben als Prosa zu schreiben, denn das Sprachmaterial ist bereits vorhanden. Für Müller wird das Kleben einer Collage daher zum *Turnen*, zur sportlich-körperlichen Betätigung auf einem ganz anderen *Feld*, das losgelöst ist von den Begrenzungen, Einschränkungen und Sachzwängen der Prosa. Das ist es, was ich letztendlich an Müller schätze. Nachdenken bedeutet nicht nur eine intensive Beschäftigung mit dem Stoff, sondern es geht oft darüber hinaus. Es verbindet sich mit banalen alltäglichen Dingen, wie dem Turnen, die oft sogar humorvoll daherkommen und das Nachdenken

stören. Das ist das höchste Maß an lustvoller Freiheit, das eine Schriftstellerin erreichen kann, vor allem eine, die nicht gerade für leichte Lektüre bekannt ist. Und hier bin ich wieder beim feministischen Impuls angelangt. Für mich drückt sich der Müllersche Feminismus durch Bewusstmachen ihrer *agency* aus. Selbst Hand anzulegen (durch Collagieren) zeichnet sich nicht durch gesellschaftskritische Analyse am Patriarchat aus, sondern bedeutet im Müllerschen Universum ganz konkret, Macht durch Worte an denjenigen Angstgegnern auszuüben, die sie einst in Angst und Schrecken hielten.

Im letzten Teil über Müllers Collagen möchte ich auf ein spezifisches Wort eingehen, das für die Autorin eine ganz besondere Bedeutung gewonnen hat, nämlich die „Mokkatasse.“ Kaum jemand kennt und benutzt dieses Wort heute noch. In Müllers Werk taucht es in verschiedenen Texten, Variationen („Knorpeltasse“) ja sogar Sprachen auf (unter anderem als rumänische „ceasca de moca“). Daher war ich neugierig und habe mich auf die Suche begeben. Weg vom Machu Picchu hin in heimatliche Gefilde. Spätestens an dieser Stelle muss ich gestehen, dass meine Biografie sich mit Müllers in einigen Punkten überschneidet: in Rumänien geboren, das kommunistische Regime noch erlebt und nach Deutschland ausgereist. Die Sprachen, die wir sprechen, die Identität als Rumäniendeutsche und die intensive Auseinandersetzung mit *Heimat* sind nur ein paar Berührungspunkte.

Warum hat dieses Wort Müller fasziniert? Weil „Mokkatasse“ ein Wort ist, das eng mit Oskar Pastiors persönlicher Geschichte verbunden ist. Büchnerpreisträger Oskar Pastior ist ein weiterer Dichter aus Rumänien, mit dem sie an ihrem Roman *Atemschaukel* (2009) zusammengearbeitet hat. Für Herta Müller wird dieses grenzüberschreitende Wort, das sich loslöst aus Diskursen der Erinnerung und Biografie zu einem Schlüsselmotiv. Es partizipiert, sichtlich gebrochen (durch Collage), vereinzelt und herausgelöst aus jeglichen syntaktischen Zusammenhängen (also Stellen in Zeitschriften, in denen es vorkommt), an der Rekonfiguration ihrer Heimatgeschichten. Und es erlaubt mir wieder querbeet zu reisen: durch Texte, Archive, Sekundärliteratur und meine eigene Familiengeschichte. Schließlich gibt die Arbeit an *Atemschaukel* Herta Müller die Gelegenheit, an der traumatischen Lagererfahrung ihrer Mutter zu arbeiten, so dass sie fehlende und verschwiegene Trümmer ihrer eigenen Biographie mütterlicherseits zusammentragen kann.

Grenzüberschreitungen, Mehrsprachigkeit und Geschichtsfetzen der deutschen Minderheit in Rumänien kennzeichnen folglich das

Verständnis der neu beheimateten Fläche, die sich ansonsten aus heimisch klingenden bundesdeutschen Wörtern zusammensetzt. Müllers collagiertes Verständnis deutscher Landschaft präsentiert sich so als transnationales Ensemble von Einzelheiten, das Keime von Materialität, *Wahrheit* und *Präzision* in sich trägt. Die weitläufige Kartographie der verstreuten Stellen der „Mokkatasse“ belegt, dass Müller sich aus dem engen Kreis von Biographie, Schreiben und Erinnerung gelöst hat. Damit wird die „Mokkatasse“ als Wortgegenstand mündig und bewegt sich autonom zwischen nationalen Kontexten, literarischen Epochen und Texten hin und her, so dass sie nur flüchtig an *einem* Ort verankert wird. Schließlich wird das Geflecht aller Texte, in denen die „Mokkatasse“ vorkommt, zur collagierten Landschaft, welche die Leerstelle Heimat mit mobilen, transnationalen und materiellen Gegenständen füllt.

Ihre Anregungen holt sich die Autorin von *außen*, aus Zeitungen und bunten Prospekten. Darin offenbart sich, wie stark Herta Müller zur Interpretin (und Konsumentin) dieser Zeit geworden ist, die sich nicht scheut, auf das fremde Material einen eigenen Blick zu richten und es nach Bedarf mit eigenen Wortschöpfungen anzureichern. Darunter mischt sie immer wieder die alten *unbehausten* Wörter und erzeugt neuartige Wortlandschaften. Damit vollzieht Müller einen Schritt vom Schreiben in die Intermedialität, von einer *fixen* Autorschaft zu einer multiplen, mehrstimmigen Autorfunktion.

long process of growth ... a journey, but not necessarily of an arrival (Joeres, *Respectability* xix)

Die vorhergehenden Darlegungen helfen vielleicht besser zu verstehen, warum es sieben Jahre dauerte, einen einigermaßen vernünftigen Rahmen für die Dissertation zu finden. Es half, die Widersprüche und Fragmente als ästhetisches Prinzip bloßzulegen. Daher verstehe ich Ruth-Ellens Äußerung sehr gut, dass ihr Denk- und Schreibprozess von einer unproblematischen Beschäftigung mit Frauenliteratur ausging, um sich später zu einer skeptischen, ambivalenten und komplexen Betrachtung zu entwickeln. Es erging mir—wie das obige Beispiel zeigt—ähnlich. Jedes Thema zu Müller, über das ich nachdachte und schrieb, wurde mit der Zeit komplexer und stellte eine Herausforderung dar. Dazu kam die biographische Verflechtung, die eine klare, analytische Trennung zwischen dem Gegenstand Herta Müller und der Interpretin (mir) unmöglich machte.

Nichts ist spannender als eine neue Herausforderung und heute arbeite ich als Landesbeauftragte USA für die Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste e.V. aus Berlin. Das ist spannend, weil Länder, Kulturen und Sprachen (weiterhin) mehrschichtig sind. Reizvoll ist, einen Ort im Niemandsland zu gestalten, der zwischen deutscher Organisation, amerikanischen Projektpartnern, idealistischem Anspruch und gleichzeitig pragmatischer Verwaltungsarbeit hin- und herpendelt. Schließlich möchte ich meine besondere Affinität zu einer Organisation, die sich im In- und Ausland für die Belange des Friedensdienstes, der interkulturellen Begegnung und der Aussöhnung engagiert, herausstreichen. Bereits in meiner Kindheit im kommunistischen Rumänien hatte ich verstanden, wie wichtig eine Organisation ist, die sich um den Bildungsaustausch, den Dialog der Zivilgesellschaften und um die Verständigung von Menschen unterschiedlichster Kulturen auch unter schwierigsten politischen Bedingungen bemüht. Die Wertschätzung der Bildungs- und Versöhnungsarbeit von Non-profit-Organisationen wie der Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste e.V. begründete meine Motivation als Mitarbeiterin junge Menschen und Mitstreiter\*innen, die sich mit Idealismus für eine gerechtere und friedlichere Welt engagieren, zu betreuen. Angekommen bin ich noch lange nicht.

| I used to envision a quite different book than the one I  
| have now written. (Joeres, *Respectability* xix)

Ich wollte eigentlich ein ganz anderes Essay schreiben. Ich wollte darüber reflektieren, was seit unserer ersten Begegnung im Jahr 2000 bis zu unserem offiziellen Abschied im Jahr 2007 passiert ist. Ich habe Ruth-Ellen als engagierte feministische Lehrerin, Intellektuelle und Theoretikerin, die fest an Interdisziplinarität glaubt, erlebt. Ich habe sie darüber hinaus als erfahrene Redakteurin und kritische Leserin sowie unterstützende Doktormutter kennengelernt. Ihre Stimme hat sich für immer eingebrannt und hat tiefe Spuren in meiner Arbeit hinterlassen. Sie strahlte *Empowerment* aus, brachte mir Reflexivität bei und schuf eine besondere Art von interdisziplinärer feministischer Gemeinschaft. Stattdessen habe ich dieses Essay geschrieben. Eines, das sich auf mysteriöse Weise selbst entwickelt hat.

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## Chapter 6

# Mindfulness in Academia



# Mindfulness in Academia: On the Fine Art of Intellectual Labor

## Beth Ann Muellner

**Beth Ann Muellner** is a Professor of German Studies in the German and Russian Studies Department at the College of Wooster, where she has taught language and culture courses since 2004. Her research focuses on nineteenth- and twentieth-century autobiographical writing, photography studies, museum studies, and interdisciplinary approaches to literature. She has published on the writing of Annemarie Schwarzenbach, Eugene Marlitt, Malwida von Meysenbug, Lou-Andreas Salomé, and on representations of and by royal women: Elisabeth of Austria (Sisi) and Elisabeth of Romania (pseud. Carmen Sylva). Her current book project is: *Working the Gilded Cage: The Life and Writing of the Poet Queen Carmen Sylva*.

B R E A T H E.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Inhale.

Exhale.

B R E A T H E.

If you do not begin each task this way, no matter how big or how small, you should. This is my mantra. I try sometimes to imagine Carmen Sylva, aka Queen Elisabeth of Romania, the subject of the book I've been writing for the past eight years, beginning her multitudinous daily

tasks this way—from writing the over fifty books she produced during her lifetime (1843–1916), to helping her husband King Carol I of Romania govern a newly constituted Romania, to running the several charitable organizations she founded—all the while trying in vain to produce a male heir to the throne. How else to survive but by taking deep breaths?

In my own intellectual labor, I would like to say I learned breathing exercises from Ruth-Ellen, but I did not. In my memory, she was the epitome of the busy professor, always producing, always thinking, always running from one thing to the next. Short on breath, but long on insight. But neither should I have expected to learn correct breathing techniques from her: it is a discovery that needs to be made alone, by turning inward (*Pratyahara*), practicing solitude (*kaivalya*), and quieting the mind (*citta-vrtti-nirodha*), as suggested by second-century BCE yogic scholar Pantañjali. I include the Sanskrit words here to acknowledge the gaps that exist in translation, and in the historical and geographical distance of yoga's Vedic origins from my full comprehension of these concepts as a white, western woman of privilege. The practice of acknowledging those who came before me, as well as recognizing my own position in this hierarchy of learning, is something I did learn from Ruth-Ellen. And, despite the perception that white western women have killed yoga, at least according to the insightful series of 2019 podcasts entitled *Yoga is Dead* by the Indigenous practitioners Jesal Parikh and Tesal Patel, I am determined to learn better and to honor yoga's history and traditions. My pursuit of a meaningful yoga practice persists because the positive energy it brings far outweighs the negative, starting with the reminder to just take a deep breath when beginning any task. Like writing this essay.

#### B R E A T H E.

After over twenty years of teaching German language and culture, sixteen of those at a small liberal arts college in the heart of a politically red state in the US, the practice of breathing deeply, of forming my body into shapes (*asanas*) that might defy its age, and of meditating to calm the mind have come in handy many times. I began yoga while pregnant and in graduate school, with Ruth-Ellen as my dissertation advisor, and have continued the physical practice during my entire academic career. In 2017, I completed a two-hundred-hour teacher training course to help others learn about yoga's benefits, and I have been teaching to

faculty colleagues and staff at my college since then, alongside my other teaching obligations in German. My yoga teaching weaves throughout our campus in unexpected ways, as well as into my professional life more widely: I guide my beginning German classes through yoga asanas to learn body vocabulary and the command form; I lead neuroscience majors through the physical practice of yoga to accompany their theoretical and scientific focus in the seminar “Stress and the Brain;” I lead our college trustees in yoga stretches during the lunch hour during their campus meetings; at our annual Coalition of Women in German (WiG) conference, I offer yoga stretching to balance our days of intense listening and dialoguing. But why do I begin my contribution to this Festschrift celebrating Ruth-Ellen on breathing and yoga? Because Ruth-Ellen’s ability to weave the personal and the professional parallels the holistic approach to my career that yoga has taught me.

Ruth-Ellen excels at embedding personal reflection and experience within her scholarly writing. In her 1992 *Women in German Yearbook* article “Language is Also a Place of Struggle,” she began with a personal reflection on the contradictions of working as a feminist in the *male domain of Germanistik*; in her 2015 co-edited publication *On the Future of Scholarly Writing*, she and Angelika Bammer reflected on the increasing importance of the *how* of scholarly writing next to the *what* of scholarly writing. Each chapter of the volume focuses on the meaning of writing in different disciplines, with an emphasis on how academic writing can be made more accessible, particularly for mainstream audiences in this era of questioning the importance of disciplines (especially in the humanities) in higher education in general. How fitting that the essays in this Festschrift, a genre that has seemingly fallen from grace, are pushing creative boundaries by newly defining what a Festschrift can be. I dare say that Ruth-Ellen’s influence has struck again.

That this Festschrift should redefine the genre is very much in keeping with the feminist academic practices that its authors learned from Ruth-Ellen, beginning with always questioning and pushing boundaries. Much of Ruth-Ellen’s scholarly writing was about the very art and practice of writing itself, and she frequently emphasized words and their meanings: in her contributing essay in *On the Future of Scholarly Writing*, “Found in the Details,” she ponders the word “detail.” In her 1998 book *Respectability and Deviance* on nineteenth-century women writers, she investigates meanings for the German words *Beruf* (profession/calling), *Wissenschaft* (theoretical knowledge), *Wirtschaft* (practical knowledge), and *Arbeit* (work). Her habit of allowing the

personal and professional to dynamically coexist in her writing becomes evident in her penchant for dialoguing with herself, asking questions and offering answers in an almost conversational tone.

I am struck by how much Ruth-Ellen's influence reaches into my own scholarship, in my own boundary pushing, insisting on making space for mindfulness practices within my teaching and academic responsibilities, as well as in giving clearer definition to women's lives and writing. When I stumbled upon Carmen Sylva during my research on the Habsburg Empress Elisabeth, I was surprised how often Sylva mentioned work and how often the theme of labor, especially women's duties, came up in her autobiographical writings, a subject that seemed antithetical to the life of a queen, especially in comparison to Empress Elisabeth, who seemed to desire nothing less than to escape her duties. Sylva repeatedly emphasized the craft and labor of writing in her texts. Thus, in the three-way conversation between Ruth-Ellen, the poet-queen Carmen Sylva, and myself that follows, we ruminate together on the ways that the personal and the professional converge, and on the meanings and importance of the intellectual work of writing and reading.



RUTH-ELLEN: Beth, tell me what have you been up to recently?

BETH: I have spent roughly the past eight years writing a book that will introduce the oeuvre of poet queen Carmen Sylva (1843–1916), also known as Queen Elisabeth of Romania, to English-speaking audiences.

RUTH-ELLEN: What prompted your interest in Sylva? Tell me about that.

BETH: [B R E A T H E]. Well, I have to admit that I was first drawn to Sylva's unusual penchant for having herself photographed posing as seamstress, weaver, composer, writer, and painter throughout her castle, reflecting what seemed to be the queen's obsession with mimicking aspects of labor.

SYLVA: I did not *mimic* labor! I labored!

BETH: Yes, true, but I was still struck by the number of photographs that you had made of yourself in which you performed some kind of activity—where you specifically did *not* sit idly in front of the camera as did so many other nineteenth-century photographic subjects.

SYLVA: Well, if you're going to talk about my self-images as performance, let me point out that someone had to set the record straight. Since birth no one really ever saw me for who I truly was. In my day ... "it was to many quite a shocking idea, that a princess should not merely have the misfortune to be born a poet, but that she should actually take no pains to conceal so terrible a fact! That sort of talent really could not be considered suitable to one's station, and where there was no possibility of extirpating [it], it must be at least hidden away out of sight!" (Sylva, *From Memory's* 108).

BETH: Well, certainly you did not hide your talent, especially given the over fifty volumes of poetry and prose that you produced. I must admit though, I have fallen prey from time to time to my own prejudice over the categorization of your writing as *Trivialliteratur* or to accusations that you emphasized quantity over quality.

SYLVA: Trivial or not, it sold to eager audiences. My fairy tales about the Romanian landscape, *Peleschmärchen* (1882–1887), to offer one example of many, were highly popular in Romania, Germany, England, and the United States as well as around the world, and they were translated into numerous languages.

RUTH-ELLEN: Yes, but you were a queen. Isn't it obvious that your work would have been published?

SYLVA: On the contrary! I worked ceaselessly to get my work published, an effort you can hardly imagine, given the prejudice against women pursuing intellectual work.

RUTH-ELLEN: Actually, I can imagine that quite well.

SYLVA: At one of the many tedious social gatherings that my ladies and I were forced to endure, all dolled-up in the most uncomfort-

able gowns, my most-trusted lady-of-the-court, H el ene V ac arescu, overheard my husband’s Hohenzollern cousin Wilhelm II say: “... to me a woman who writes is a being who is absurd, ridiculous ... [c]lever women are dangerous women, one and all, who ought to be muzzled before they can bite ...” (V ac arescu 137).

RUTH-ELLEN: Ah, writing—that deviant behavior! Well, I hope you got some good “bites” in.

SYLVA: I did indeed. I wrote a whole book of aphorisms, some more biting than others. But one thing I’ve always said is: “Schreib nicht, wenn du’s lassen kannst” (“Don’t write if you can help it”; my trans.; Sylva, *Gedanken* 72).

BETH: Yes, writing is hard, and even more so when women have to constantly prove themselves as writers—or as having the ability to think at all. In her memoir *Mein Penatenwinkel*, for example, Sylva wrote extensively about the boredom that her grandmother endured, expected to stand around like a silent ornament while the men conversed. But what intrigues me as well is the way in which Sylva constructs her self-image as an intellectual laborer, which I first glimpsed in the photographs.

SYLVA: Creating that image was part of the reason why I had the photographs made. Of course, people were always curious about royalty, and we were often in the tabloids, so I should admit that I *did* have a ready audience. But I wanted people to better understand what it meant to be a working queen. And some might say that everything that I pursued creatively and intellectually—from writing stories, to illuminating manuscripts, to holding regular salons in which I featured and promoted the work of Romanian musicians—I did to support my husband’s efforts to build a new Romania. Even my former literary collaborator and lady-in-waiting Mite Kremnitz claimed that “[t]he positive achievements of the king to bring fame to Romania pale in comparison to those of Romania’s first queen” (my trans.; Kremnitz 1). But this wasn’t necessarily the way the king or his advisors saw it. Most of my projects were considered private initiatives, and I received no official budget for them. By selling photographs and publishing stories, I was able to fund charitable pursuits such as the

organization *Concordia* that I established in 1885. It promoted the art of weaving, spinning, and silk production of local (primarily female) artisans.

BETH: And the artistry of Romanian embroidery is widely recognized today. I bought a beautiful, embroidered blouse a few years ago when I was visiting the places where Sylva lived.

RUTH-ELLEN: I am often struck by how often the art of needlework and that of writing overlap in different ways, as in the example of women writers disparagingly reported about as preoccupied with knitting in the farcical *Protocol and Report of the First Meeting of German Women Writers, Held at Weimar in 1846* that opened my book *Respectability and Deviance*.

SYLVA: Yes, “[s]ome men don’t like when the ladies work. It is a mistake.” My first response is that needlework “is so much better than their smoking; it is so unobtrusive” . . . and secondly, it is such “a help when in conversation we do not wish to contradict; we seem to grow silent over some intricate bit of work, and none can guess the little volcano that is covered with the lava of our work” (Elisabeth, *Art of Tatting* x).

RUTH-ELLEN: The contradictions between deviance and conformity that you talk about remind me of the aristocratic and bourgeois German women writers that I know so well, like Bettina von Arnim and Louise Otto-Peters.

BETH: Indeed! I also find it striking that women are almost always the primary protagonists in Sylva’s stories: mothers, daughters, grandmothers, sisters, widows, divorced women, childless women, women of leisure, and women who work. Work was a constant theme in her writing as well. For example, in *Handwerkerlieder* (1891; originally appearing in English as *Songs of Toil* in 1887), she glorifies various trades and crafts; in the fairy tale *Furnica* (1883, originally translated into English in 1889), an industrious young girl elects to become queen of an ant colony and to sever all ties to humanity; in the memoir *Mein Penatenwinkel* (1907, translated into English in 1911 as *From Memory’s Shrine*), Sylva emphasizes the symbiotic relationship between all occupants of the royal

household, devoting the same amount of reflection to the work of butlers or governesses as to certain well-known visitors, such as her piano teacher, Clara Schumann.

SYLVA: Oh, how I loved Frau Schumann! Now there's a woman who understood the importance of earning money with her artistic talents, although it was really out of necessity, due to her husband's early death. I had it easier in some ways, but I don't know what I would have done as a child without the servants. It was they who often rescued me from the "Reitpeitsche" (riding crop) and "Zwangsjacke" (straitjacket) that were used to quiet me as a girl, for I was unusually lively. Due to my own strict upbringing, I later became quite outspoken about educational reform, particularly regarding the importance of storytelling and fantasy in children's lives. And my governess, "unser Fräulchen," whose real name was Fanny Lavater, taught me how to navigate the complicated world of castle living (Sylva, *From Memory's* 97). "How people could often be so at odds, constantly feeling hurt, feeling resentment, with their hatred and arguments and not getting along! That is no fun in a lonesome castle.... Such a castle is really a world unto itself!" (Sylva, *From Memory's* 94).

RUTH-ELLEN: I am curious about that though. In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf wrote that women of the nobility were often "shut up in their parks among their folios ... solitary great ladies ..." as compared with an "unknown Miss Austen or a Miss Brontë" having to share a sitting room, be constantly interrupted, and to hide their prose whenever someone walked into the room (Woolf 95, 87).

SYLVA: Well, "[t]he Prince likes to find me at every free moment he has, and so I am always at home. He must never notice that I am at work. When he calls or I hear his footsteps, pen and paintbrush are thrown away till he does not want me any more" (Stackelberg 200-1).

RUTH-ELLEN: So, what you're saying essentially is that a queen also needs "a room of her own"?

SYLVA: Yes, but "[i]t should actually be quite small—the big luxury in the castle made my work at the beginning quite challenging,

especially after the thirteen years we [Sylva and husband Carol] spent in the cloister, in small, white-plastered rooms. I read about myself, that it must be easy to write in such an inspiring environment [of Peleş castle]. How people err! I wrote ‘Jehova’ and ‘Hexe’ in a cell that was four feet wide, with almost no light, and in which it was so damp that I had to keep my feet on a block so that they wouldn’t get moldy” (my trans.; Sommer 18).

BETH: The theme of space seems to pop up frequently in your writing. You focused so much on the *where* of writing. Can you tell us why?

SYLVA: I moved about quite a bit in my life, from the Monrepos palace in Neuwied, Germany, where I grew up, to the palace in Bucharest when I got married, to the cloister I mentioned in Sinaia during the construction of our summer residence in the Carpathian Mountains, and finally, to the opulent rooms of the Castle Peleş. I also spent two years in exile in Italy, forced out of Romania due to the perception that I was meddling in state affairs. And even though I was the Queen of Romania, I was never given citizenship there. So much for what it means to be Queen and the power the title evokes.

BETH: I see connections between the way that Sylva describes space and the way feminist spatial theorists like Doreen Massey, Gillian Rose, and Chandra Mohanty discuss space as a social construct that is often at odds with itself, as a place of both refuge and confinement, of both unity and loneliness, and of both security and surveillance.

RUTH-ELLEN: Hmmm. Can you say more about that?

BETH: One notable example is Sylva’s play *Meister Manole* (1892), based on the Balkan folktale of “The Walled-Up Wife,” in which a woman literally becomes enclosed in a structure’s walls. The Balkan legend insists that a “construction sacrifice” is necessary to keep the walls from tumbling down each evening. Sylva clearly identified with such an existence, writing: “[i]t is a strange prisoner-like existence on the throne; one is always closed in and at home ...” (Sommer 53). Because the entombed woman happens to be the fertile, nursing wife of a brilliant architect, artistic

sacrifice becomes part of the narrative. Like Manole, who must sacrifice his wife so that his structure can stand, Sylva's artistic creativity burst forth after her daughter's death and despite her subsequent miscarriages. And given Sylva's penchant for building autobiographical details into most of the stories she wrote, she calls specific attention to the conception scandal that plagued her marriage and duty as queen in the play.

SYLVA: Well, I couldn't pass up that opportunity. The irony of a folktale that featured a fertile mother who became walled-in hit close to home. I was essentially a walled-up queen who remained childless. And as I always said: "Le métier de souveraine n'exige que trois qualités: la beauté, la bonté, la fécondité" ("The job of a queen demands only three qualities: beauty, goodness, and fertility"; my trans.; Sylva, *Les pensées* 147).

BETH: Your ironic tone in that aphorism is not lost on us, especially when I read that you lost your only daughter when she was just four, and then suffered seventeen or eighteen miscarriages in your efforts to secure an heir to the throne. I am so sorry for these losses.

SYLVA: Well, first, thank you for acknowledging them. That is something I never experienced from the court. In fact, the king's advisors considered it *my* fault for not producing an heir. They thought that my intellectual activities were compromising my body's energies to conceive! Can you believe that?

RUTH-ELLEN: Oh yes, that is no surprise. We know that the nineteenth-century male medical establishment cut women no slack. None of them ever really understood women's bodies to begin with, nor were they inclined to consider the possibility of male infertility.

SYLVA: Well, this is exactly what I indicated in *Meister Manole*, which only had a short run in Vienna. Even so, there it was on stage: my princess-character declared quite openly that it was her husband's "corrupted seed" that was the problem, and that she would no longer attempt to conceive. I always did believe that all this aristocratic in-breeding was a problem.

RUTH-ELLEN: Well, that is a pretty bold claim for someone who pursues needlework so as not to speak out-of-turn!

SYLVA: Oh, I had my moments. But primarily, I found comfort in the written word, always. As I wrote to a friend: “thank God, the genius of poetry goes secretly with me to the audiences, to the forests, to the schools, to dinners, too, etc.” (Stackelberg 200–1). I would have lost my mind of loneliness or sheer boredom otherwise.

BETH: Indeed. Walled-up, or in confinement due to a global pandemic, with literature and writing, we can never really be alone.

RUTH-ELLEN: I couldn’t agree more!



And here we all E X H A L E.

In the many hours I’ve spent thinking about Sylva and her life, I often wondered if yoga ever entered the conversation. It’s not a far stretch, really. Due to the illnesses suffered by her mother and her youngest brother, her family was interested in all sorts of alternative healing practices. After her mother’s lameness was healed through the practice of touch (akin to Reiki), she herself became a sought-after healer and converted one of the family palaces into a hospital. Furthermore, the practice of yoga became a hit in the US with the introduction of it by Swami Vivekananda at the World’s Columbian Exhibition in Chicago in 1893, about which Sylva may well have known, as an avid follower of various World’s Fairs (she even won a prize at one for a tatting stitch). Much earlier, however, European interest in and knowledge of India (and yoga) came with German Sanskrit scholar and world-traveler Georg Forster’s (1754–1794) published writings, and so it is possible that Sylva would have encountered the idea of yoga through her keen interest in reading seemingly everything. Moreover, throughout the nineteenth century, different reform movements were coming into vogue, including the new *Turnbewegung* in 1807 with Friedrich Ludwig Jahn. Perhaps inspired by her friend Empress Elisabeth of Austria, who

was an avid sportswoman herself (an equestrian and extreme hiker), one of Sylva's favorite activities was to invite all the castle's visitors on extensive hikes through the surrounding countryside near Peleş Castle. These excursions are captured in group photographs with large numbers of hikers with backpacks and walking sticks at the ready, posing against a hill, frequently with Sylva at the top. Thus, the theme of exercise presents a future angle to consider in Sylva's writings. For now, it is fun to consider the dream of work-life balance for all of us, even though it gets complicated when comparing Sylva's much slower-paced life with that of Ruth-Ellen's and mine. Hard to imagine what Sylva would have said about our practices today. I guess that's fodder for another imaginary dialogue.

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Section 3

# **Feminist Collaboration in Action**





**The pieces in this section** share not only common themes, but also a common format. Eschewing the conventional single-authored, monovocal form of standard academic writing, they present a multi-authored dialogue in different voices. Rather than simply talking about “feminist collaboration in action,” we, the authors of this section, demonstrate through our choice of form what such collaboration *looks* like, how it *feels*, what it *does*. Feminist collaboration, these pieces show us, entails a particular approach to work: one that involves speaking with and to one another; listening, not just holding forth. Feminist collaboration means sharing authority across a range of different positions: valuing the process, not just the product. These written dialogues also theorize theory, while demonstrating a healthy skepticism toward its potential to distill, and thereby simplify, women’s lives and feminism—things that are highly complex, politically subversive, and inescapably real. In the multiplicity of voices that emerges here, we theorize in order to create a framework for understanding feminist practice and, perhaps more explicitly, feminist collaboration.

Integral to this process is female friendship. Revealing how friendships emerge out of shared work and intensive dialogue, the dialogic approach modeled here both reflects and participates in the process of building relationships. Female friendships, we affirm, are central to feminist practice. They create a sense of community to help overcome the experience of isolation that hobbles so much academic work. They allow us to be honest with one another, to share rather than hide our vulnerabilities. They build trust that we will be listened to and the hope that we will be heard. The relationships we create with one another—as teachers, scholars, and individuals—are an essential element of feminist practice. As we illustrate, they shape everything we do: how we teach, how we write, and how we conduct administrative business. At the same time, the feminist practices that bring us together now also connect us, transhistorically, to other traditions in women’s writing: the *Briefwechsel* of the eighteenth century is linked to and recreated in the email and videoconferencing of the twenty-first century.

While friendship is central to all three pieces, competition is a fascinating undercurrent that runs through them as well, one that cuts at least two ways: feminist work has the potential to resist negative forms of competition while it also participates, sometimes unconsciously, in it. These pieces nod to the institutional and structural forces that create (and, some would argue, demand) competitive dynamics, and raise questions about how competition intersects with feminist practice. Is competition anti-feminist per se? Does or can feminism—or at least feminist work—contravene in the neoliberal structures that enforce competition? What could or would *feminist competition* look like?

Feminist collaboration, we argue, reconfigures how we understand work. However, as we make evident, it doesn't just mean that our work is different. It also means that the demands on us increase. Attending to needs and commitments in our personal lives (as parents, spouses, domestic partners, friends, and as caretakers of parents, other relatives, or household pets) in addition to needs and commitments in our professional lives (as teachers, mentors, supervisors, colleagues); finding consensus instead of decreeing top-down; engaging in dialogue instead of submitting a monologue—all of this extends the boundaries of what we take as “our work.” The cost is evident. Reconfiguring work in this way demands more time, energy, and attention. Why do we do it, then? Is the effort worth it? The answer, in all three pieces, is an unequivocal and passionate: yes! We find community to counter isolation and to support the search for a meaningful work-life balance. Incorporating pleasure into our work renews our energy; being able to laugh—and yes, cry—together sustains us emotionally. In all these ways, feminist collaboration is literally transformative, as a practice and as a promise: it changes the very forms of our work. It imbues us, as Liz/Lisa so beautifully put it, with “a sense of invention, of newness, of possibility” (159).

## Chapter 7

# **Feminist Collaboration**



# Feminist Collaboration: A Conversation

## **Brigitta (Britt) M. Abel**

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There were things I loved about graduate school: being surrounded by people who felt passionately about the things that I also cared about; great discussions about texts and life and teaching; hours of reading and re-reading, writing and re-writing; Friday knitting and beer with a circle of friends; getting involved in the Coalition of Women in German (WiG) and finding a place there, complete with long hours of typing articles for the WiG newsletters in the early days of computers; working

with wonderful professors, most particularly Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres, who spent hours talking with me about my work.

At the same time, I think we all knew that some things weren't so great about grad school: earning poverty wages with no hope of saving money or building a safety net for ourselves; the uncertain job market and not knowing what will happen next; the feeling of powerlessness that many of us experienced; the pressure to prove ourselves, again and again, and the many hoops we had to jump through in order to do that—and the imposter syndrome that many of us faced while jumping through those hoops. Indeed, while the work itself and the people with whom I worked were the best parts of grad school, the context in which we worked and labored together was structurally less than ideal.

When I look back now, I think my biggest regret involves the way in which that context undermined what I loved the most about grad school. I was finally surrounded by people with whom I had so much in common and whom I liked and respected enormously. Yet the pressure to prove ourselves often seemed to mean that we had to prove ourselves at the expense of others. My graduate student colleagues and I were competing for the same funding and the same research and teaching opportunities; we were competing for time with our professors and for ways of demonstrating that we really did belong where we were; at times, we were competing for the same jobs in a cutthroat market. In the midst of all this, we built friendships and we worked together, yet always with the underlying tensions of the academic context. Not every relationship I had was tinged with underlying competition and tension, but it was hard to subvert the trap that graduate school, with its hierarchies and power structures, laid out for us. Where was collaboration in this model? Was it even possible? Only a few moments of my early academic career allowed me to explore collective work, either by doing it myself or by witnessing its potential.

One of my models for collaboration during my graduate-student years came from my work with *Signs: The Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. When Ruth-Ellen and Barbara Laslett were editors of the journal at the University of Minnesota, I worked as the editorial assistant for a year and had the opportunity to witness how each issue of the journal came into being. I attended the monthly editorial board meetings and had the daunting task of taking detailed minutes of the board's discussion of submitted articles. Sitting in a room with the best feminist minds on campus was an amazing experience, as was listening to the discussion about each article. But even more powerful was the

experience of seeing how this group of faculty worked together. Yes, there were disagreements, but the consensus model of making decisions was powerful, as were the ways in which Ruth-Ellen and Barbara guided the conversations, listened to others, and helped ensure that each article was discussed fairly. While these meetings constituted a step in the gate-keeping that is so prevalent in academia, Ruth-Ellen and Barbara made certain that every voice in the room was heard and valued, that articles were evaluated critically and based on their merit. As I documented these meetings, I witnessed the potential of this type of feminist, collaborative environment and the fruits that such an environment could bear.

A few years later, while I was writing my dissertation, Ruth-Ellen built a similar feminist, collaborative space, this time for scholars at the beginning of their careers. She had several advisees writing dissertations at the same time, and she proposed that we meet monthly and discuss our work. Ruth-Ellen convened the group, but we functioned as a collective: we took turns sharing and discussing our dissertation chapter drafts with one another, and while the general structure of the work was similar to what I had seen during those *Signs* board meetings, the meetings had a different tone that reflected the purpose of the sessions. We were there to support each other, after all, and there were none of the hierarchical ranks that pervade most academic gatherings. If I thought the *Signs* meetings held feminist potential, these meetings represented even more of the feminist collaborative spirit that I had craved throughout my graduate career.

I remember these sessions so fondly. We would convene at Ruth-Ellen's house, chat and catch up, share stories, laugh, and then get to work discussing a selection from one or two dissertations-in-progress. Now, I don't know how other students felt about these meetings, but in my mind, they stood out as one of the best times of graduate school. We were isolated as we wrote our dissertations. Finding a structure for that writing was hard, and I struggled, more than I ever had in my academic life. But these meetings gave me a sense of audience; after all, these were the people for whom I was writing. More than that, the collaborative space that opened up to me was unlike any I had experienced in grad school before. Maybe it made a difference that we met off-campus. Maybe it made a difference that we were all ABD (all but dissertation) and had negotiated all the academic steps except this last one. Maybe it made a difference that we were all just doing our best to write, write, write. But what clearly made a difference is the way in which Ruth-Ellen created this space and welcomed us all into it by

fostering a truly collaborative and supportive spirit. I felt fortunate to be working with Ruth-Ellen throughout my academic career. Yet of all the ways in which she supported me and her other advisees, this initiative felt like the most significant one to me.



FIGURE 7.1

Twenty years later, I still think of that collaboration and of its possibilities. That experience shaped the work I do now and how I do it. I'm no longer a graduate student, and I've had my "duh!" moment in realizing that it's not just graduate school that discourages collaborative work. True collaboration is just as, if not more, difficult for a professor as it is for a student, particularly given how the neoliberal university functions for faculty in the humanities. Collaborative work is often not recognized in the tenure and promotion process and finding both time and space to collaborate is a continual challenge given the ever-present quandary of too many things to do. The busy-ness of our lives pushes us apart in much the same way the competition for resources did in graduate school. And yet, I still thrive when I work with other like-minded people—in fact, the most significant work of my academic career has been done collectively.

I am currently working on a collaboratively conceived and produced project: an open-access, online, first-year German curriculum that aims to build inclusivity and accessibility into the language-learning process. Born out of growing frustration with traditional textbooks for beginning German, *Grenzenlos Deutsch (GD)*; <https://grenzenlos->

deutsch.com) seeks to provide materials that reflect the lives and realities of our students today, including a nuanced examination of gender and the ways in which it functions in the German language as well as topics such as sustainability and social justice, all with interactive activities and authentic content.

A feminist collaborative process distinguishes the creation of *Grenzenlos Deutsch*. The project was conceived in a colleague's personal Facebook rant about sexism and the lack of gender and racial diversity in first-year German textbooks<sup>1</sup>; the discussion on my colleague's wall quickly progressed to a proposal for an open-access textbook that would not only be constructed around inclusive content but would also be available online for free, thus building accessibility for instructors and students alike. The two project directors, Dr. Amy Young and I, knew that multiple voices were necessary for building an inclusive curriculum; we also felt the need to work collaboratively on a project such as this. How could we achieve our goal of diversity and inclusion without a diverse set of voices contributing to the project? We sent out a call for participants and were overwhelmed by the number of responses we received. The result is our Collaborative Working Group of ten authors and twelve editors for the *GD* team. When we received a digital advancement grant from the National Endowment of the Humanities in August 2017, we were able to bring the entire team of authors to Vienna<sup>2</sup> for four weeks to gather content and to author the material. During this time, we learned how to use the technology tools for authoring our online materials and made many of the decisions that shaped the curriculum. While we already had a general outline of topics and structure for the materials, we built in enough flexibility so that our

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1 Special thank you to Dr. Brenda Bethman, Associate Teaching Professor of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies and Director of the University of Missouri Kansas City's Women's Center, for her post and the discussion that it fostered. While Brenda was unable to participate in the *Grenzenlos Deutsch* project herself, her observations and comments came at just the right moment to initiate the project.

2 "Why Vienna?" is a question I hear frequently. During the first two phases of content collection, collaborators traveled to Germany and Austria to record interviews, take photos, and gather the material we would need to author such a curriculum. This larger, third phase of the project took place in Vienna for both ideological and practical reasons. One of the goals of the curriculum is to de-center notions of Germanness and the Germanocentrism of many textbooks, so establishing Vienna as a home base made sense. At the same time, because Central College, Amy Young's home institution, ran a study-away program in Vienna, we were able to rent their suite of offices at the University of Vienna for our use during the entire month of July. This practical consideration made the decision about location easy for us project directors.

entire group could make decisions together about how we envisioned the curriculum and how best to make that vision a reality.

For many of us, that intense workshop time in Vienna was foundational to our *GD* project work—it shaped both the product, the *GD* curriculum, as well as the process for creating the product. As you will read below in a conversation with several of my collaborators, many of us looked back on that germinal time fondly, particularly because of the collaborative space that opened up for us and how that time and space has shaped the way we work together now. Since that summer in 2018, our project has been collectively and collaboratively run. While Amy and I, as co-PIs for the grant, take care of details, the bigger decisions—about how to continue our authoring, how to make small and large revisions to the curriculum, and where we want to go next—are all based on consensus of the larger group. We have extended this collaboration to include jointly written articles<sup>3</sup> and conference presentations, as well as working-group meetings to support each other’s progress on this—and other—projects.

I couldn’t imagine talking about feminist collaboration without the voices of my collaborators. In what follows, several of my collaborators responded in writing to questions about their involvement in *Grenzenlos Deutsch*, about how they define feminist collaboration, and about which moments of our work together particularly exemplified that definition. I sent out a call to the entire *Grenzenlos Deutsch* authorial and editorial board<sup>4</sup> asking for participation in this essay, and five members were able to contribute at the time I wrote this essay. Their contributions were made individually, and I have woven them together—along with my own responses—to create an asynchronous conversation. I am grateful to the whole *Grenzenlos Deutsch* team for our work together and for the inspiration each member has provided to me. I wish in particular to thank Amy Young (Central College), Tessa

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Abel et. al. and Young et. al.

<sup>4</sup> The entire *GD* team consists of: Brigetta M. Abel, Erika Berroth, Angineh Djavadghazaryans, Maureen Gallagher, Ron Joslin, Adam King, Karolina May-Chu, Isolde Mueller, Simone Pflieger, Elizabeth Schreiber-Byers, Faye Stewart, Louann Terveer, Tessa Wegener, and Amy Young.

Note that I list names here in alphabetical order, while the names that follow in the main text are listed in reverse alphabetical order. How we attribute our collective work has led to numerous conversations about pushing against the conventions that dictate name order, debates about the pros and cons of using a collective team name, and suggestions for supporting the most precarious of our team members.

Wegener (Middlebury College Language Schools), Simone Pflieger (University of Alberta), Maureen Gallagher (Australian National University), and Angineh Djavadghazaryans (Oakland University) for the time they spent responding to my questions for this essay.



**BRITT:** *What made you decide to join the Grenzenlos Deutsch collective?*

**MAUREEN:** A desire to smash the patriarchy! But, seriously, it was mostly borne of a frustration with the books that exist and a desire to be part of the solution rather than part of the problem, or part of the great masses of people who complain but don't take action. I know that some advocate for teaching against the textbook, but I don't think that's compatible with the extortionate cost of many first-year language textbooks from commercial publishers. How can we ask students to pay hundreds of dollars for textbook purchases or rentals that contain unacceptable sexism, misogyny, xenophobia, ethnonationalism, racism, and heterosexism? I was inspired by the almost utopian vision of *Grenzenlos Deutsch* in offering curricular materials with more diversity, representation, and accessibility, available at no cost to teachers and students.

**SIMONE:** My decision to join *GD* was influenced by my own teaching experiences as both an instructor and a PhD student in a traditional German studies department. Having taught with three different textbooks over the course of eight years, I had grown increasingly frustrated not only with the kinds of identities and bodies typically represented and how these images often shape our students' perception not only of German language and culture, but also how they marginalize, trivialize, and even silence those identities that are illegible according to the hegemonic standards imposed on subjects in contemporary society. Since I am sensitive to issues of diversity and inclusiveness, and I attempt to create a classroom atmosphere that assures mutual respect, by joining *GD* I saw a chance to help develop materials that foster a more diverse and inclusive approach to language learning and provide students

not only with an awareness about diversity in the German-speaking world, but also with vocabulary that they might find useful in their personal and professional lives.

TESSA: As soon as I heard about this project, I was intrigued, because it spoke to me on multiple levels. I saw this as an opportunity to create something entirely new for our discipline, to be part of a feminist collaborative initiative, and to develop a radical alternative to existing textbooks on the market. The idea of creating an open access German curriculum was very exciting to me; throughout my graduate career at Georgetown, I had been engaged in curriculum development and reform. I was therefore very eager to be part of this innovative project. Not only would it be a new challenge and learning experience for me, but it would also—more importantly—completely change the textbook landscape in German studies.

BRITT: I'm glad Tessa mentioned the process here as well. I think many, if not all, of us were drawn to the idea of *fixing* the problem that we saw in traditional textbooks. That continues to be true, but I think many of us now value the process as well as the product, the sense of working in a collective to create a product we can be proud of.

TESSA: Aside from the digital format and accessibility, I was drawn to the idea of what the collective was seeking to achieve with its content. This project, for me, is a form of activism; it seeks to present a more inclusive approach to *doing* German studies. It challenges past models of (heteronormative, racist, classist, ableist, homophobic) representations of everyday life; it takes students seriously as intellectual adult learners from complex, diverse backgrounds; it shifts our focus toward underrepresented cultures of the German-speaking world; and it seeks to amplify voices and topics that have not been previously included in mainstream textbooks.

ANGINEH: I decided to join the *GD* collective at first because of the nature of the project. I was just finishing grad school and getting ready to start my first job ... and was increasingly experiencing exclusionary situations in my classes due to textbook and

curriculum limitations, among others. I had just started a project working on inclusive teaching strategies (mainly gender inclusivity) when the call for participation came out. So, I was very interested in the idea of creating something that was based on inclusion. Honestly, at that point, I had not thought much about what collaboration on such a project would mean. But the nature of the collaboration is probably one of the reasons why I decided to continue being part of the *GD* collective.

**BRITT:** Angineh's comment resonates for me. This project was born out of frustration, just as Angineh, Maureen, Tessa, and Simone mention. Again, I think most of us share the same initial spark for our involvement in the project. But when we started the work—and started to consider bringing people together to produce the curriculum collaboratively—I had no idea how important the collaborative *process* would become, for both my personal and professional life. This project has shaped me in ways I never anticipated because of the intense collaboration and the rapport we established through our work together. While the collaboratively-produced product was the initial goal, the process of collaboration turned out to be as important and transformative as the product itself—if not even more so. Amy highlights this distinction below.

**AMY:** I helped create the *GD* collective because the project is the embodiment of some of the things that I want to be as a feminist: we're changing the landscape of materials available to teach first-year German, and we're doing it in a way that we hope will support the others in our collective.

**BRITT:** *How would you define feminist collaboration, especially in light of the work we have done together?*

**MAUREEN:** Before being involved with *Grenzenlos Deutsch*, I don't know that I had any kind of concrete idea of what feminist collaboration was, outside of spaces like WiG that had a special energy and were non-hierarchical, where input was valued from everyone, regardless of academic status or position, and where there were opportunities for real dialogue. From day one in Vienna, something about our collaboration felt very special—we were all united, working together to accomplish something truly

amazing. I am still a bit awed by the ambition (and perhaps also the naiveté) with which we entered the project, and it's hard to describe what that month in Vienna felt like: with ten of us in a room, united toward a common goal, one much larger than any one of us would be able to accomplish on our own, working independently and together simultaneously, and taking time to support and learn from each other. It was a collaboration that was non-hierarchical, cooperative, and relied on consensus-based decision-making.

BRITT: I have to laugh at Maureen's mention of our ambition—or naiveté!—because I agree with her so much. We all had this big idea and a vision of how we wanted it to happen, and it's still somehow hard for me to believe that we've made so much of it happen. Okay, so we didn't write the whole curriculum in a month—not a surprise!—but somehow, we were able to lay down the entire framework and to build the collaborative structures we needed to move forward. I love the way Maureen describes our time in Vienna, since she puts words to the way I felt about that collaborative space, too.

SIMONE: Feminist collaboration, I believe, can be defined as working practice that values dialogue, mutual respect, trust, and multi-focal and -vocal positionalities of all those involved in a given project. It means sharing responsibilities and ownership and is committed to a recognition of inherent privileges, as well as differing abilities and precarious institutional settings. Feminist collaboration in the ways that I have experienced it as part of *GD* signified a sense of togetherness, care and support, and a mode of working with and being in relation to others in ways that are non-threatening, non-profit- and output-driven, or non-destructive.

ANGINEH: I could write a lot about this, but in its core and in light of the work we did together, I would define feminist collaboration as working together (or maybe “being together” as I think that feminist collaboration goes beyond the actual working part) in a supportive and judgment-free environment that recognizes that each person's strengths AND weaknesses contribute valuable voices to the project.

BRITT: I really like how both Simone and Angineh bring up the idea of shared responsibility as well as strengths and weaknesses and the sometimes precarious context of what we do. I think one thing we've all struggled with at different times in this process is the natural ebb and flow of our work. We have all had Big Life Stuff happening while we've been working, including employment changes and challenges, and we've all had times when we couldn't contribute as much as we would have liked or when we fell behind. I think our natural response is to feel guilty during these moments. And now we're trying to retrain our brains, to recognize that this happens and that the value of the collaboration is that one of us can pick up where the other has left off. It has been interesting to see how all of our roles shifted during our collaboration, especially as two of our editors, who were not part of the authorial team in the Vienna workshop, took on larger roles: substantive editing and authoring when we needed more support in that area. The sense of shared responsibility came through at these moments when we took on the tasks that others weren't able to do at a particular moment in time. And our recognition of precarity, too, came into play as we divided the work and considered which tasks made sense for which team members. For example, I remember when Amy and I were deciding which institution should house our National Endowment for the Humanities (*NEH*) grant proposal. Amy has tenure; I do not (my appointment is off the tenure stream). Amy suggested that if housing the grant at my home institution would aid in securing my position, then we should strongly consider that factor in our decision-making process. We also tried to manage tasks with attention to those who were on the job market or working under the tenure clock, whenever possible.

One of my questions is: how is *feminist* collaboration different from collaboration in general? Collaboration should revolve around shared ownership and decision-making, around an open work process in which everyone feels empowered to participate equally. But I think the way Simone brings in the political is important to the core of what feminist collaboration is: this recognition of precarity and privilege that we've all discussed so much throughout our work. Tessa had some additional thoughts about this aspect, too.

TESSA: Feminist collaboration, to me, is characterized by mutual support, democratic processes, organic contributions and development, and genuine empowerment to create, imagine, and produce. Throughout these past years of collaboration, we received unwavering and uncompromising support from Britt and Amy—and from each other as collaborators. We were constantly encouraged to take our ideas and transform them into reality; we were empowered to use our expertise and interests to produce our best work; we all knew and understood that not one individual has ownership over any single part of the project—we were in this together and knew that we could produce our best work when everyone was involved. Though we came from various academic backgrounds and had different areas of research expertise, we worked in support of the project's overall goals of promoting inclusivity and accessibility.

AMY: In my mind, feminist collaboration aspires to continually remember and empower the people that heteronormative, white supremacist, ableist patriarchy would prefer we forget: women, people of color, queer folk, people with disabilities, poor people. We also tried to let this remembering influence the structures that we build and the work that we do. Ideally, we also get beyond remembering to transforming. James Farrell, in *The Nature of College*, pointed out that everything we do as academics either reinforces the status quo or transforms systems for the future. I think that we are fundamentally doing very small tasks, one at a time, in a collective effort to contribute to transforming the system.

BRITT: ... as, for example, re-thinking the order in which we list noun classes or genders, the way in which we name and discuss linguistic gender, and adding non-binary language choices in our curriculum. We do these “small things” that undermine the status quo even while we attempt to tackle bigger structures, like how we access curricular materials.

TESSA: [Yes,] feminist collaboration means breaking down barriers, challenging hegemonic systems, and thinking and acting radically. I'd like to think that our project did all of these.

**BRITT:** *Is there a moment, an insight, or a story from our GD work so far that represents or embodies that definition of feminist collaboration?*

147

**TESSA:** When I think of feminist collaboration from our *GD* project, I immediately recall our entire group sitting around the large table at our “office” in Vienna during our weekly meetings, hashing out ideas, debating sequencing, etc. While it was challenging at times, I realized that what we were doing was undeniably feminist—Britt and Amy sought to create a truly democratic structure within our group and, rather than calling all the shots themselves, wanted us to feel empowered to have ownership over the project as a collective.

**SIMONE:** I think a moment that highlighted feminist collaborative processes for me during our work on *GD* was when we had to negotiate together how to best organize the curriculum. We had some heated discussions about what grammar and vocab items should come where and how these items should be best introduced and practiced. I remember distinctly that some of us had very strong and firm opinions of what worked best and what should be included in a first-year curriculum to be useful to a variety of German programs and departments, opinions that were in opposition to one another at first. Through many conversations, weighing the pros and cons, arranging, adjusting, and readjusting, we were able to settle on what we, as a team, deemed to be the optimal solution for *GD*. I still value greatly how these conversations were handled respectfully and with care, understanding, and appreciation of a variety of opinions and voices.

**BRITT:** I love reading what Simone says here, particularly because I remember one heated moment when I told her that I didn’t give a shit whether students could use the genitive case after completing first-year German. While that sounds pretty disrespectful, it wasn’t intended as such (imagine a playful tone to the comment!), and it led to a discussion of the curricular standards different universities and colleges employed for placement and articulation. In other words, a moment of disagreement became a productive conversation about our institutional locations and how they influenced our perspective on curricular development. And I’m glad Simone seems to have forgiven me!

MAUREEN: For me what best exemplifies our collaboration was how we made our decisions about how to label genders and what we wanted our charts to look like (maskulin, feminin, neutrum? Neutral? Femininum, Maskulinum, Neutrum? Masc., fem., neut.? F, M, N? etc.). It truly was a model of consensus-based decision-making. We didn't vote or take sides, no one pulled rank, we just talked things through until we reached a solution that was acceptable to everyone. It certainly took longer than if things had been handed down by edict, but it nonetheless allowed us to weigh the pros and cons of various options and to think through what was important and what mattered to us. These long discussions that resulted in mutually acceptable solutions ultimately strengthened our collaboration and allowed us to feel like we all owned the final product equally because we all helped shape the final form it took.

BRITT: Like Maureen, I was also surprised at the turn that some of those conversations took, but it makes sense. We wanted to produce something that presented gender—as both a linguistic and social construct—in a different way, so decisions about the small details that Maureen mentions loomed larger than we expected. It really helped that we were all committed to that shared value, as well as to presenting the material in a way that would help students who were approaching the bewildering world of gendered nouns for the first time. The ironic thing is that after those long and—at times—heated discussion, we've now moved away from those “mask/fem/neut” labels entirely and are shifting to “noun class” rather than “gender.” But I wouldn't call our long discussion about linguistic gender labels obsolete or unnecessary despite the shift we've made, because it was such a crucial moment for defining our collaborative process.

MAUREEN: I also think our efforts to manage our time, particularly while we were in Vienna, said a lot about how feminist our collaboration truly was and still is. No one was expected to be a brain on a stick or to work like an automaton or to sacrifice work/life balance or leave partners or children at home. We worked hard, long hours, but we also gave ourselves time to socialize and enjoy the city and take evenings and weekends off if and when we needed them. I think it says a lot about the strength

of our collaboration that even after hours-long meetings and work sessions, we still all wanted to take meals and socialize together!

BRITT: Thanks for bringing up the issue of time, Maureen, since that's something we've discussed a lot, too. I'm hyper-aware that we're all volunteering our time for this project and that we needed to respect everyone's time and what we could give to *GD* when we could give it.

While we were in Vienna, we were lucky to have rented the Central College office suite at the University of Vienna for the month. We used the space for our meetings, of course, but those were the only required times to be there; otherwise, people worked in the office suite, in their rented apartments or rooms, in cafes; people went out for breaks or to take photos or record interviews. We came and went as we needed and wanted, although we fell into a general routine, with many of us working in the office starting around nine and leaving around five, but with a lot of flexibility in between. Sometimes we ate lunch together, and sometimes we didn't. And of course, the social times were the most memorable, like when most of us headed to the international food festival in front of the *Rathaus* and got caught in a brief but torrential downpour. We were working so intensely that those moments of fun and non-work time spent together were precious.

In general, I loved the trust that was palpable in the way we managed our time: we knew that everyone would take care of themselves to do what they had to do when they could.

MAUREEN: Even after we left Vienna and continued the project from our home institutions, we were respectful and considerate of everyone's various personal circumstances and job changes.... We had worked to support each other to continue forward progress without an expectation that we would all work inhuman hours or sacrifice all of our personal time to finish the project.

BRITT: I also really like how we've created structure for ourselves and the work that made our progress sustainable and fun. In the summer of 2019, we had virtual working meetings every weekday morning. Anyone who wanted could join in, and we would check in on what we were working on, set some goals, and then write. While it was a poor imitation of our time in Vienna, it still brought

me back to that collaborative space and helped me so much personally: in making progress on the project, of course, but also in shaping my day, in creating a structure for my work, in connecting with my colleagues, and in rediscovering the collective joy that was a hallmark of our intensive workshop in Vienna.

In the spring of 2020, as we were all working from home during the global COVID-19 pandemic, Maureen suggested that we revive this practice. Throughout the spring and summer and into the academic year 2020–2021, we again had standing working group meetings, and it's something I continually look forward to, especially during the challenging time in which I write this essay (summer and fall of 2020 and early winter of 2021). During our meetings, I know that some of us were continuing to build *GD*, while others were doing the other things that we needed to get done. But we're working in the same virtual time and space regardless, which means that our collaboration had extended beyond the *GD* project.

ANGINEH: The working group meetings we had in the mornings during this time of uncertainty, chaos, and lack of routine created such a supportive environment that went way beyond the work on the project for me.

AMY: I think that the moment that best embodies that definition [of feminist collaboration] is actually a non-moment. Using previous textbooks, I was forever supplementing materials, so that students could talk about their real lives. I had to add material so that students from blended families or with LGBTQIA+ identities could talk about their lives. When I have taught with *GD*, students had most of the language that they needed to talk about their lives without feeling like they're weird or causing me extra work. It also feels very empowering to know that as we learn more, we can adapt the curriculum to work better. We can literally transform this system we have created on a nearly daily basis, so that it will be better for the future.

BRITT: I think all along we agreed that the issues we faced in our language teaching couldn't be solved by an additive approach. In other words, we can't simply supplement certain vocabulary terms or topics as a corrective, since the problems are so deeply

embedded in the materials that are published. By this I mean that we can't just add words to describe *non-traditional* families, for example, when all the characters and narratives in a textbook revolve around heteronormative, white, able-bodied families. The additive approach doesn't fix the structural and systemic problem. But by telling different stories and representing different identities, we start to shift the overall framework. What we did was certainly imperfect, but it's a start. I would argue that our start was moderately successful because of our attention to process.

Perhaps this is really the point: we initially had ideas about a *product*—both what we wanted and what we didn't want—but we had to land on a *process* that would enable us to get there, to produce the type of materials that we wanted to use in our classrooms. I've spent the past two academic years (2019–2021) piloting our materials, and it is a true joy to teach with materials that I don't have to apologize for. I don't have to teach against the textbook, as Maureen mentions at the outset of this conversation, but instead can let the materials speak for themselves.

But there's another more private joy that comes from teaching with *Grenzenlos Deutsch* for me: so many lessons harken back to our time together in Vienna, and I end up teaching with a huge grin on my face. With the images, the videos, and the ideals that we've created together, it feels like all my collaborators are there in the classroom with me. I'm so grateful for that.

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## Chapter 8

# **Autogynographically Speaking**



# Autogynographically Speaking: A Dialogue on Feminist Friendship

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**Lisa Roetzel** is Director of the University of California, Irvine's (UCI) Campuswide Honors Collegium, a four-year undergraduate honors college. She oversees the academics, community, and support that assist UCI's diverse honors students in achieving their goals and is committed to the transformative development of the whole student. She previously held positions as Director of Development at UCI, and as

Associate Professor of German at the Eastman School of Music. Foundational to her career in higher education have been her doctoral studies in German at the University of Minnesota and the feminist teachings and encouragement of professors and peers.

## **LizandLisa**

We are speaking with one another over thousands of miles, from opposite corners of the US. We immediately recognize each other's voice, and despite our significant geographical and temporal displacement, we easily lapse into a familiar exchange. We have known each other for what seems like an unbelievably long time, and our lives have taken their own, separate paths. However, once we connect, our conversations are buoyed by an undercurrent of shared history; I know you and you me, we GET each other.

Our shared history began as graduate students in the University of Minnesota's Department of German during the 1980s. There we experienced a graduate education that was extraordinary in many ways, during a time when many tenets of literary study were being challenged: the growth and development of women's studies within German studies was giving rise to a questioning of the canon and inclusion of previously ignored writers and genres, and to the development of feminist approaches to teaching, literary analysis, and literary theory, to name a few. We were led, taught, and mentored through this exciting time by Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres—an experience that was ultimately transformative.

We have so little opportunity in our busy lives to hold things in our hands and examine them closely. It is a privilege to be able to contribute to this project, and to pause and look back at our formative years and the interconnections that have been woven since through the influence of Ruth-Ellen. As graduate students we were colleagues: we took classes and engaged with a wonderful group of fellow graduate students, we studied together, collaborated, competed, and supported one another. We were close friends, then roommates, with the disarmingly similar names of Liz/Lisa, who diverged in our areas of specialization as budding scholars, and spurred each other on as we wrote our

dissertations, receiving our PhDs in the same year. We both now have careers—one as a professor of German studies, the other in academic administration—with families, children, activities, and causes that we care deeply about. We are both busy, so much so that our phone calls, like the rest of our lives, have to be scheduled.

We wanted to begin this conversation in a way that is autobiographical—and as all autobiography is relational, our story is doubly so. In what follows, we will take turns diving down the rabbit hole of our shared memories and see what we find in the process. And since memory is always a co-creation of the present tense in which it is being re-called, our reflections will inevitably touch on those layers of living and thinking, working and creating, that have filled the gap since those days in Folwell Hall. LizandLisa. In many ways, lives lived in parallel, from grad school until today....

### **On Collaborative Teaching: Getting the Keys to the Car**

LISA: Now that I look back on it, I realize that our graduate school experience was in many ways what today we would call student-centered, where collaboration was encouraged and valued. I recently rediscovered in some old files our syllabus from the summer of 1987 when, as graduate students, we were asked by Ruth-Ellen to co-teach a course for undergraduates entitled “Autobiographical Writings of German Women” (Fig. 8.1). While we both had extensive language teaching experience as teaching assistants, I think for both of us this was our first experience teaching a literature course. It was kind of like being handed the keys to the car for the first time. I was both excited and nervous about teaching this course, wanting to live up to the trust that Ruth-Ellen had placed in us, but the fact that we were teaching it together ultimately made the experience a very positive one.

I remember hot summer days in Folwell Hall, a brick and marble edifice built in the early twentieth century, its tall casement windows flung wide open to let in a breeze, as we traded off teaching the various texts. We made it interactive, as we had been taught to do, structured the class to encourage participation and engagement, and gave our undergraduate students contextual framework and critical tools for the analysis of German women’s self-life-writing. In retrospect, the scope was highly ambitious for a five-week

summer course for non-majors—authors ranging from Adelheid Popp and Rosa Luxemburg to Christa Wolf and Verena Stefan—and texts were looked at through the lenses of genre, gender, identities, class, historical context, and writing the body.

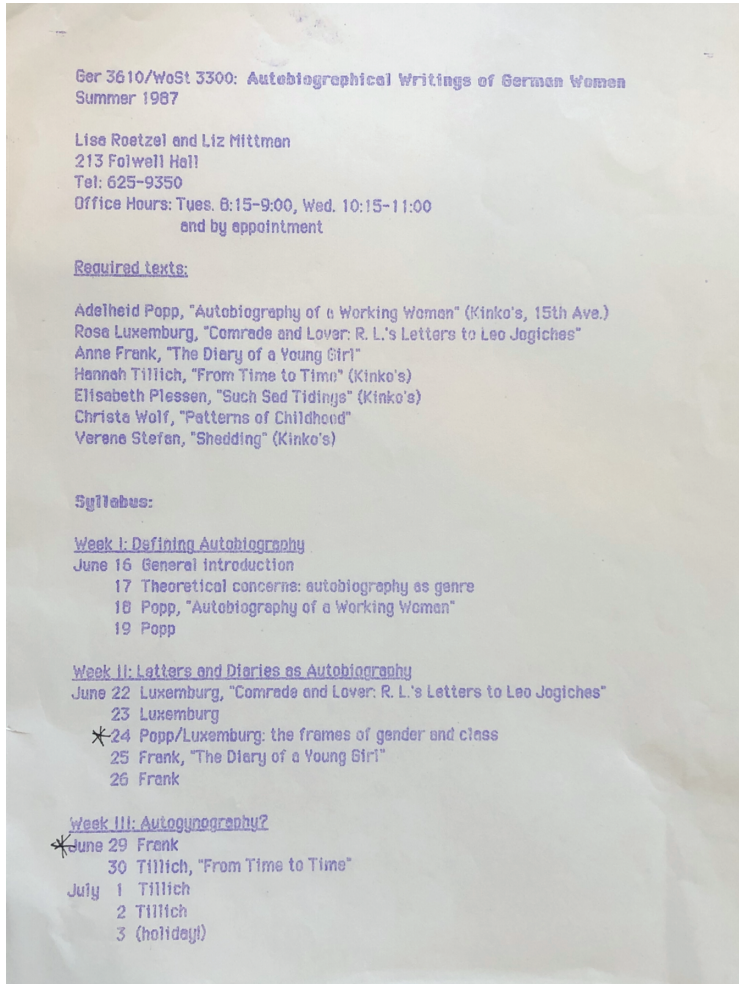


FIGURE 8.1

I remember that the course unfolded as we taught it. While we had collaborated previously as students, co-teaching was a whole different matter. We planned each class with great care, brainstorming, discussing, and coming up with approaches, topics, and responsibilities for each class session. But what ultimately made this

experience so satisfying was both our collaboration and the playful, experimental approach we brought to the course. I think it is easy to become bound by the seriousness of the academic enterprise, and in retrospect I am proud that we seized the opportunity with delight and had a great deal of fun inventing each class session. By the time we taught this course, each of us had become interested in different aspects of German studies—from eighteenth-century literature to contemporary East German writing—and brought that diversity to play in the classroom. Teaching this course well ultimately meant trusting one another completely, both as teaching *colleagues* and as friends, as well as allowing ourselves to be vulnerable as we planned and taught the course.

LIZ: Sometimes I think we thought more freely, grandly, openly, because of those high ceilings and tall windows in Folwell Hall, letting in so much light (*mehr Licht!*). I think we had a sense of invention, of newness, of possibility. Not just because we were young and new ourselves, but precisely because of the newness of what we were doing: just a few years earlier, in our own undergraduate experiences, we hadn't (at least I hadn't!) been given the chance to (re)frame literary studies around women's voices, much less personal narratives. Letters and diaries were not genres traditionally considered appropriate fodder for literary analysis. The letters of a political philosopher and revolutionary, or the memoir of a socialist activist and journalist—these texts fell outside the parameters of the canon on multiple levels. Your recollections of crafting an open—some might say feminist—pedagogy felt completely consonant, even necessary, with the nontraditional course content. For me, beyond the emphasis on student-centered teaching lay something equally important: my (our) own path of discovery and self-discovery. Passionate engagement in scholarship can take a lot of different forms—it doesn't have to be overtly personal by any means, but in the specific context of teaching and learning about autobiography, the connections are hard to avoid, and from that course in a sultry Minnesota summer more than thirty years ago until today, the idea of autobiography has informed much of my own teaching and research.

LISA: I completely agree that this experience offered us as instructors a learning experience that was profound in its implications for our

own development, not only as feminist scholars but also as a way to engage in feminist practice as teachers. Of course, this had been modeled for us by Ruth-Ellen and other mentors, but it is one thing to have it brought to you as a student and another to experience it in your bones as you teach it.

LIZ: Teaching is magical that way, isn't it? To teach well, we continually have to open ourselves up to our own learning, to memories of sitting in those students' chairs, to the joy and terror of discovery—knowledge and ignorance residing so closely side by side.

### **On Collaborative Writing: Finding Voices**

LIZ: A year before that summer class, and four years into our friendship, we co-wrote a paper for a history seminar taught by Annette Kuhn, a visiting scholar from Germany. Our paper carried the lofty title: "Self-Preservation as Political Action: The Ambivalence of the Reformation for Aristocratic Women." We attempted a case study of the lives of Caritas Pirckheimer and Elisabeth von Braunschweig-Lüneburg based on their published letters. Pirckheimer was abbess of a convent in Nürnberg; Elisabeth was a Lutheran convert who ruled Braunschweig-Lüneburg for five years after her husband died and until her son came of age. I think we found the topic fascinating in a remote sort of way—these women were an exotic find, startling to us in their possession of audible female voices in the early sixteenth century, and in some strange sense worthy of a blend of both pity and admiration. In the paper we claimed that "... Pirckheimer and Elisabeth used their voices to achieve the highest degree of autonomy and security possible.... both women supported the patriarchal institutions that were oppressing them. After examining these texts, we may conclude that their actions were actually undermining those institutions as much as was possible within their specific social and historical contexts" (Fig. 8.2). The professor questioned our somewhat sweeping conclusion but was still generous enough to give us an A on the paper. I love that we trusted each other enough to write this paper collaboratively. There was a kind of vulnerability in linking our fates (for a grade—small-bore but still!), yet also a solidarity.

What do you remember about the class and that writing pro-

ject? Does anything about the topic of that paper, or the process of working on it together, resonate for you today, either in your own (re)construction of that earlier chapter of your life story or in more recent contexts?

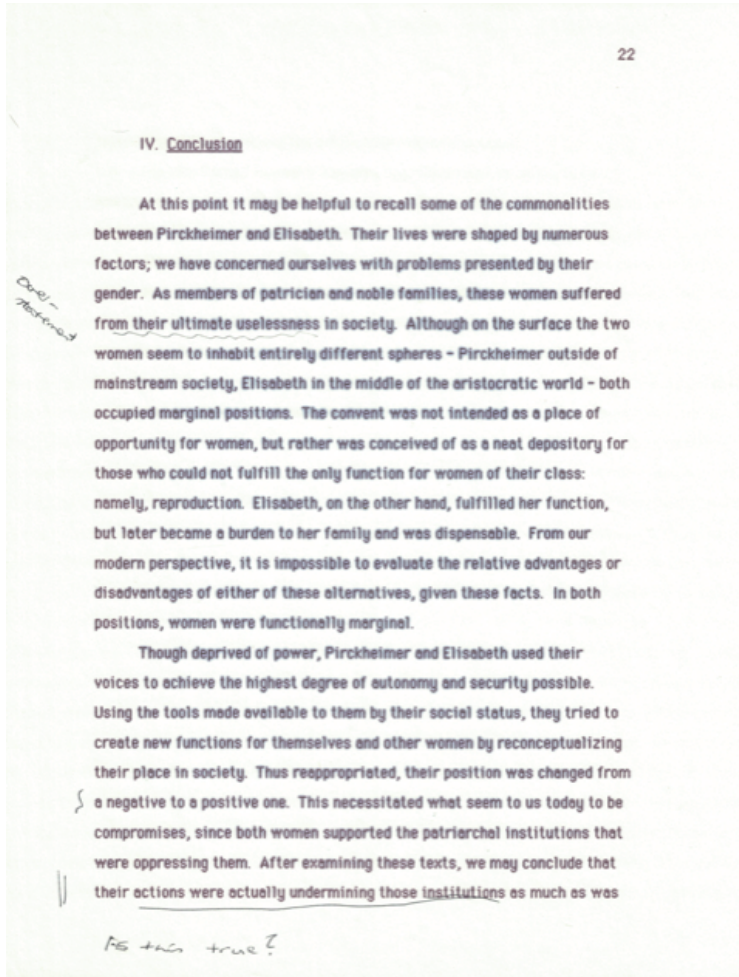


FIGURE 8.2

LISA: I remember really liking the project, because it meshed with my interests at the time in discovering “undiscovered” women writers. Of course, since the correspondence had been published, the lack of discovery was really my own, but as a graduate student I was

fascinated by the efforts of historians to explore the lives of everyday people, and in particular the lives of women. I think now in retrospect that we might have been a little dualistic when we made our conclusion—I suspect that there was more complexity in those texts than we saw at the time.

As for the question of how this resonates with me—there are a couple of things. You talk about female voices and women’s agency, and for me as a young woman, that was what feminism was all about. My *awakening* was so typical for a middle-class American teen—it was through watching TV in the 1970s and seeing women protesting and hearing about the fight for the Equal Rights Amendment. I found a lot of support from family and friends to go to graduate school in German, but I somehow hadn’t put together the fact that women’s studies and feminism would be something I could study at the university. It now seems so naive and shows you how little I knew about women’s studies in *Germanistik*.

LIZ: I’m actually in awe of you—that you already had some sort of feminist awareness as a teenager. My own awakening to the importance of gender in my own life came much later. In fact, I can pinpoint that recognition directly to seminars with Ruth-Ellen in my first two years of graduate school! From a Proseminar on the diary as literary genre in my first year (which in retrospect felt like a sidling up to questions of gender via genre, subtly bringing it into view), to a second-year course on twentieth-century women writers—these lives, these stories (and our discussions about them) changed *my* life.

So, by the time we wrote that history paper, several years into grad school, thinking about gender had become central to my self-conception and to my studies. But as a student, my experiences of living on the inside of institutions were still very thin; categorical statements flowed easily from my pen. Looking back at this student project from the vantage point of more than two decades of professional life, I find myself wondering: what is really different for us today? In what respects are *you and I* worthy of either pity or admiration? I often feel I have fallen short of my own intellectual and moral potential, of a certain internal charge to make the world a better place. As I look back over those pages—and I honestly can’t even remember with certainty which part I wrote—it strikes me that both of us lead lives that, one could argue, support the

patriarchal institutions that oppress *us*. Of course, I also have greater appreciation today for just how challenging it is to critique from within, to find practical paths of resistance. Living and working within the modern university still feels very much like a battle for self within a framework that simultaneously supports my gendered existence and would prefer to ignore it. In saying this, I am not lobbing a specific critique at my own place of employment—though my university has come under intense scrutiny for its complicity in criminal sexual conduct in the past few years. Scandals aside, I am fairly certain that similar dynamics would follow me wherever I worked in higher education. And simply to describe the imperfect institution as *patriarchal* is itself of limited utility in describing structures of oppression—in my local context, it was a female university president and provost (both now former, it must be noted) who tolerated, even enabled, the long-term abuse of dozens of girls and women by a sports doctor. As Foucault told us, institutional power runs through complex networks that make it hard for people in visible places to find the courage to stand up, much less rebel.

Not many of us are prepared to live in a state of radical *Konsequenz*, to burn down the structures within which we have been educated, nurtured, shaped (do you hear Audre Lorde here? the master's tools, etc.), and I often wonder whether I have been too timid in my own actions. In the classroom, I often feel strong, empowered to use my voice for various kinds of messages. But in the university more broadly, I often stumble, act (or not), speak (or not), out of—if not exactly conscious fear, then delicate self-preservation. I don't want to *worry* the balance, challenge the status quo too loudly or glaringly. I feel vulnerable, and it is difficult to sort out which portions of that vulnerability have to do with gender, with family status, with professional achievement.

LISA: This is thought-provoking, but I feel that you are being hard on yourself in this passage for 'falling short' or not being *konsequent*. Yes, of course, even as higher education tries to address equity and diversity, there is still a long way to go. Nevertheless, as imperfect as the efforts are, I think that colleges and universities are important spaces where these conversations are taking place, and I firmly believe that we who teach, mentor, and support students are

part of the solution.<sup>1</sup> Both of us work for public universities that serve students who need to hear from us. And this is one place where our engagement as feminists is particularly important. Just as our professors at Minnesota opened up new ways of thinking for us, you are now doing so for today's students. I think of the published collaboration with a graduate student that you shared with me as a fantastic example of the impact that your teaching and research (your voice!) has had on another person (Mittman and Santos). What we do opens up new ideas and ways of thinking for students—it also models for them examples of other voices and tools to deal with inequality and institutionalized discrimination.

### **On Community, Competition, and Friendship: Wigging Out**

LIZ: If we are going to talk about diversity and inclusion and new ways of thinking, we need to talk about that crucial place where we heard and learned about other voices, a place that was both inside and outside the academy at the same time—WiG! Coupled with the crucial mentorship of a few key individuals, the Coalition of Women in German (WiG) was surely the most powerful positive force I experienced in the context of my graduate studies. Which means: in the process of becoming an adult human being.

LISA: Yes! WiG was where I got to experience feminism in action. Attending WiG conferences opened my eyes to some of the most amazing women I had ever met—from the senior founders of the coalition down to graduate students like myself—a collaborative feminist process, and a forum for speaking the truth. I felt so supported there.

LIZ: That's a powerful combination of ideas to put in one place: speaking truth *and* feeling supported. The conversations were not

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<sup>1</sup> During the final editing stages of our dialogue, the murder of George Floyd set our hometown of Minneapolis on fire, and we watched as protesters not only there but around the world reminded us of the stakes of these conversations for real people's lives, and of the importance that they be grounded, always, in a reckoning with the systemic nature of all forms of oppression.

always easy—I can remember conferences filled with conflict and visible emotions around tough topics—but the fact that this was a community of choice, organized around a principle of *making the academy a more livable place for women*, made it powerful in unique ways. I so vividly remember going on the job market and walking through the conference hotels at the MLA. In particular, I remember noticing many male peers scuttling around, looking terrified and alone. I felt that same vulnerability, to be sure, but I didn't feel as *alone* as they looked. I remember once spotting Jeanette Clausen sitting in a hotel lobby in San Francisco, when I was headed to an interview, and asking her for last-minute advice. She paused for a moment, gazing out across the sea of suits, and then looked me in the eye and said, with a wise smile, “tell the truth!” Later at that same conference, I communed with several other job-hunting “WiGlets” (as we grad student WiGgies were called back then) in the hotel sauna, where we compared notes on job interviews, many of them with the same departments. I can't imagine a better antidote to the isolation of competition in a lean job market than shared laughter and sauna sweat.

What are your strongest WiG memories? Can you identify specific moments in your WiG experience that were most crucial for your own development, or your own well-being? As a woman, as a student, as a human being?

LISA: That kind of one-on-one attention generously given by the senior members of WiG to those of us who were just starting out in the field as graduate students was so powerful. As a student I felt HEARD, acknowledged. When someone would ask “what are you working on?” it wasn't just polite chit-chat, but an opening for an honest conversation. I gave some of my first conference papers at WiG, and despite the trepidation of standing in front of all those people I admired, I knew that my work would be respected. Unlike other national conference situations (like the MLA), the audience wasn't there to poke holes in my argument or take me down. There was critique of course, but it was done in a spirit of helping one enhance one's work or taking it to the next level.

LIZ: Closer to home, that same professional competition was an unavoidable element in the dynamic between the two of us. I marvel at times that our friendship survived—even thrived—so

well under those pressures. I am convinced that the trust that had been built through all those experiences of collaboration, in teaching together, writing together, and helping to stage three WiG conferences together, created the foundation for that solidarity (and with this, I mean not just *solidarity in suffering* as students under the pressure of our professors' expectations, or of academia's more sweeping demands). Do you remember the 1989 conference at Villa Maria, where—at Ruth-Ellen's prompting, it must be noted—we took a break from the usually scheduled special guest artist or writer to make room for an extended, open conversation on competition? Ruth-Ellen and Evelyn Beck co-moderated what became a wide-ranging, boundary-busting exchange across ranks, generations, and institutions, on the complexities of being feminist in a world where competition is generated by “issues of power, space, and scarcity” (Joeres 20).<sup>2</sup> I remember the entire space, filled with nearly 100 women (and a few men) vibrating with the tension of an uncomfortable conversation about conflict, but also bringing the oxygen of open dialogue for understanding and potentially changing our own responses and interactions to an issue baked so deep into our society, and in academia especially. I found it genuinely empowering to hear fellow students and feminist mentors discuss “the phenomenon of shame” (20) and critique the “dualistic thinking of ‘If I am not a winner, I am a loser’” (20).

Beyond dispelling the myth that all feminists get along, it was especially helpful for me to realize, in thinking about my friendship with you, that we need above all to face the dilemma rather than avoid it, and to link arms in the ongoing battle against the “self-hate present in all women, the burden of history on our shoulders” (21). These larger, community-based conversations gave us (or me, at least) the tools, during those last two years of grad school when we were not just friends but roommates, to navigate the dissertation fellowship competition (neither of us got it) and the job hunt process (we interviewed at some of the same places, and you ultimately were offered a position at an institution where we had, somewhat surreally, both been on-campus finalists).

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<sup>2</sup> All quotes in this and the following paragraph are taken from the conference report submitted by Ruth-Ellen B[oetcher] Joeres.

I've been browsing through those old issues of the *WiG Newsletter* from its Minnesota-based years,<sup>3</sup> and you know what brings me the greatest joy to find spread across its pages? Your drawings and cartoons! They remind me of that playful, joyful, life-giving space we found in WiG and re-created in our own ways there.

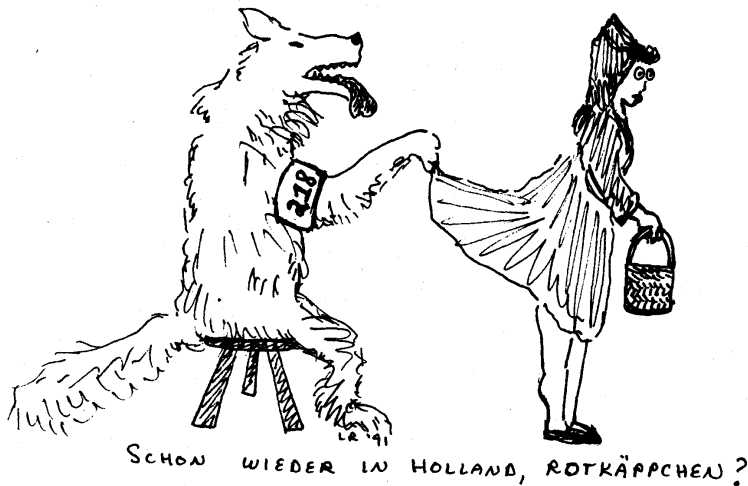


FIGURE 8.3

LISA: We became particularly engaged when the WiG Conference was hosted by the University of Minnesota's German program from 1988–90, and assisted with the conference planning and execution, as well as putting together the *WiG Newsletter*. For me, working on the *WiG Newsletter* was also a particular highlight. Julie Klassen (Carleton College) enlisted the assistance of graduate students in our department. We wrote some of the items, including conference reports, and cut and pasted the whole thing together on our department's few, highly coveted Apple *word processors*. Since I had an art background, I was enlisted to create drawings and cartoons, following the tradition established by Susan Cocalis. I knew that I wasn't at Susan's level as a cartoonist, but I did the best I could and tried to capture the spirit of WiG conferences and

<sup>3</sup> From fall 1989 to fall 1994 (issues 50 to 65) the *WiG Newsletter* was produced in Minnesota—with Julie Klassen as coordinator and University of Minnesota grad students as the editorial staff.

other issues we were addressing.<sup>4</sup> And then there were the conferences themselves!

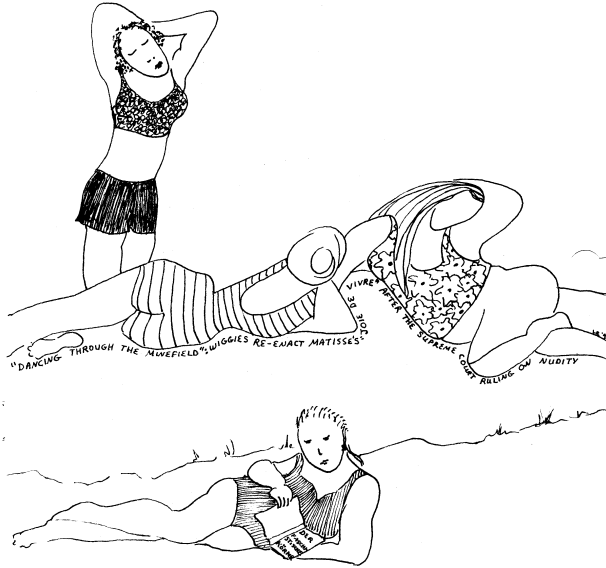
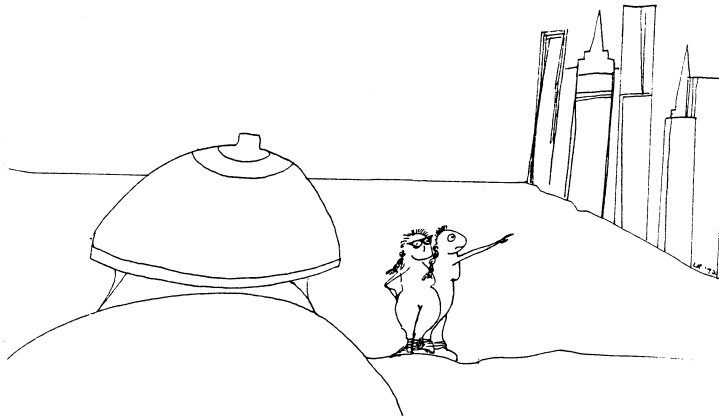


FIGURE 8.4



A LANDING PARTY FROM THE PLANET HERSTRA WONDERS ABOUT EARTH FETISHES.

FIGURE 8.5

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4 See Figures 3–5: “Schon wieder in Holland, Rotkäppchen?”; “Dancing Through the Minefield”; and “Landing Party from the Planet Herstra.”

I think when we talk about WiG we also must acknowledge the many ways that feminist practice took place, from the community process for determining future conferences to the business meeting, where I first learned what went into balancing a budget for an organization. (I do a lot of that now as a university administrator.) And then there was the cabaret, a space of playful subversiveness, where we could address the conference and other topics through satire, with various WiG members being enlisted to ad-lib particular parts. Some of this was pure fun—yes, play—and a chance for a cathartic moment after a long conference. Typically, topics or issues that arose from the conference would appear in the cabaret—whether it was a dramatization of the complex intersectional encounters between the Idas (Pfeiffer and Hahn-Hahn) and those they met in their travels, or a tutorial in how to interview at the MLA, complete with helpful tips from the “Do-Bee”—and the silly and the ridiculous were front and center. I remember playing Tipper Gore to your Al Gore—I nearly lost my dime store blond Halloween wig as I raged against sexualized pop music, while you stood as stiffly as possible and tried to calm me down. However true to the cabaret form, some of it also dealt with more weighty contemporary issues affecting women, where satire was a way to critique what was intolerable, such as the sexual harassment of Anita Hill by then Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas. It speaks for the character of the WiG community that we could both engage in serious scholarship and let down our hair (or: wigs?), trusting one another at the level needed to put on the cabaret.

LIZ: Absolutely! There are so many times when I’ve tried to explain WiG to the uninitiated, and when I get to the cabaret and the Sunday morning speakout (affectionately referred to by some as the “bitch and moan session”) it really feels as if I am describing some sort of magical, secret society. Because neither of those rituals is a structure even remotely familiar from other professional conferences available to our colleagues and students elsewhere. These intimate ways of coming together not just as teachers, scholars, and administrators, but as whole people, both require and foster trust. Not that this is easy, nor perfect, by any stretch (see above re: competition), but it’s an ongoing, deeply felt effort to respond to the very real needs of academics, particularly those

who acknowledge the role of their gendered selves in everything they do.

## **On Living Feminist Lives: Dropping Stitches While Weaving It All Together**

LIZ: The heritage of so many years in WiG—still now, but especially in those earlier years as a student and young faculty member—has sustained me greatly at different times in my life, though more recently, I have found the threads harder to tie together into a cohesive cloth. My involvement in the organization has been intermittent, for so many reasons linked to the complexities of this stage of my life and career. How have your experiences from that time we shared under the mentorship of so many strong feminists—from our professors at Minnesota, and Ruth-Ellen in particular, to the members of WiG—influenced your life today?

LISA: My education completely changed the way I look at things intellectually. It's hard to remember a time when I lacked the tools and skills that I learned from my teachers and mentors, and now use as a matter of course. I am also awed by the incredible generosity and care of the professors who guided my journey as a student. They gave me not only an intellectual framework, but also the confidence to move forward, based on the knowledge that they believed in me. I didn't always believe myself that I could navigate *the profession*. But I did ... to my immense relief.

I think where the rubber ultimately meets the road, however, is how you live your life. What does it mean to live as a feminist? I have lived a life of privilege as a middle-class white woman. I also know that feminists who came before me made possible my professional life, the fact that I have had meaningful work that pays a salary, and have been able to have a family, a child, and a personal life. As a feminist, I take it seriously that I should be supporting the next generation and helping them succeed in their careers. Giving my staff—many of whom are just beginning their careers—opportunities to grow professionally is immensely rewarding. That being said, there still remains a tension in the academy between measures of career success and women's lives. The old ideas of complete devotion to the academy as a *calling* still exist, as one per-

son who interviewed me for an academic job once threw back in my face, when I inquired about retirement benefits at their institution. We still need to stand up and stand up for others. Women working in the academy have always had lives outside of the university, as did our teachers and mentors. It can be incredibly messy and complicated as we juggle our professional lives and competing demands—the responsibilities, activities, engagements—that form our lives. However, I get the sense that more of us are now asking for and getting greater flexibility to have a personal life and try to gain the elusive work/life balance.

Liz, what have your experiences been with making life choices like this? Is there such a thing as work/life balance, or is it just a chimera intended to make us work more, and harder? And as a larger question, is there a way you think we can use our choices to make things better for the next generation?

LIZ: Our education was incredibly empowering, no doubt about it. Working in literary and cultural studies—developing critical capacities as readers and interpreters not only of classic literary texts from other times and places, but also of the signs and symbols surrounding us here and now—was nothing short of mind blowing at times. Being offered new lenses through which to do this, among them one that intersected the core of my embodied experience as I entered adulthood—that of feminist theory and criticism—endowed the entire endeavor with a kind of existential importance. But alongside the greater sense of agency that feminism gave me, that heightened awareness also made everything more complicated, both professionally and personally. My greatest internal struggles, in the years since I left graduate school and entered the working world, have revolved around the deeply entrenched social expectations for professorhood *and* for motherhood.

The romanticized roots of each of those roles are buried so very deep, both in the cultures that feed them and in the soil of my identity. The interviewer who told you “it’s a calling”—and in doing so, negated your legitimate concerns about how the job was linked with your life more broadly—was speaking from that place. And whether it’s the professoriate telling us that we should live and breathe for the *life of the mind*, or every single media outlet reminding us of the mystical power of motherhood, neither of these messages supports an integrated sense of self. In my favorite book

on the subject, *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother*, novelist Rachel Cusk peels back the layers of loss and disorientation that accompanied the experience of motherhood for her, and questions the veracity of all of those myths through vividly embodied description. The greatest challenge I have experienced is figuring out how to meet my own expectations for myself as a professor *and* as a mother simultaneously. Visible models of excellence or success in both arenas simultaneously are hard to find, and neither institution (i.e., the academy or motherhood) makes the task particularly easy.

The sexism—and the heteronormativity—of the system rears itself in some of the most mundane moments where the personal and the professional intersect. Try this: close your eyes and imagine walking into a male professor's office and seeing school photos of children on his desk. Without thinking, notice the images that come up spontaneously, unbidden: how does that glimpse of domesticity intersect with your image of him as a scholar? Do you imagine a messy life, frantic struggles with time and competing demands? Or do you imagine, even without really seeing her, a *wife*—a marginalized domestic partner—who tends to those children and their needs; a separate sphere, safely cordoned off from the professor's *life of the mind*? There's a reason I've felt ambivalent about putting my own kids' pictures on display in my office, and it is only partially explained by the sexist double standards that persist in academia, decades of real progress notwithstanding. It's also a conundrum I have never quite resolved for myself. In eighteen years of parenthood, I have felt all too keenly the threat that children pose to my scholarly self, for they lay their righteous claim to my time, energy, passion, and desire. Their presence in my life has changed me profoundly—just as profoundly as our feminist education did my young adult self. Figuring out how to marry (ha!) these identities remains a complication without resolution.

To respond at last to your powerful closing question (you'll have noticed that I took my time getting here!): I am moved by your suggestion that we pause, reflect, and reframe the choices we have made for ourselves, and consider their possible utility for others. I hesitate to generalize too much, but I will offer this modest note of optimism. In the intimate context of a relatively small graduate program, I observe that our students are coming of age with different expectations for themselves and for the profession than we did. At least here in my large, public, land-grant institution, they are far

less likely to buy into the monkish mystique of the professoriate, and are focusing a skeptical eye, early in their studies already, on the shape of a life like mine. With few exceptions, they see these complexities and question the value of traditional academic pathways. They are (more) ready to poke holes in the narratives that gave shape to our emerging selves. What can we offer to make things better? More than anything, I think, we must aggressively destigmatize any and all life choices, making it safe for them to express their doubts and concerns in dialogue with us, their advisers and teachers and mentors. Maybe, take a page from the feminist practices of WiG, and create space *inside* the academy for students to assert all of their selves.

LISA: Reflecting on how we began this conversation with our Liz/Lisa dual identity, it's interesting to me that our long friendship still rests on a foundation strongly influenced by our feminist teachers and mentors. I think for those of us who have devoted our professional lives to higher education, we believe strongly in its mission, however imperfect the academy may be. I think that higher education is one of the most impactful spaces where social change is happening today. And here is where I must believe that our actions are impacting students to some degree, just as our teachers and mentors helped shape our lives. I would agree with you that I am particularly proud of this generation, for their commitment to probing, contesting, challenging, and protesting. In their case, I would argue, the stakes are higher than when we were in school. The political landscape of the 1980s, however disturbing at the time, looks tame compared to today's challenges to our democratic principles. Our students are dealing with climate change that will impact their lives and those of their children, as well as the continued challenges of economic inequity, systemic racial disparity, and race-based violence, not to mention a global pandemic. However, I meet so many students who understand that higher education can be a way to get at these problems, to gain tools to help solve them. I see some who work from within the system, and others who take more radical approaches. I was particularly struck by a protest sign from a recent Black Lives Matter march that said, "You've messed with the wrong generation." This is a generation that has the self-awareness and the tenacity to create positive change. I have hope.

LIZANDLISA: We began this process by sifting through old papers and swapping stories, an endeavor that itself feels something like pure privilege. Going down that rabbit hole, and engaging in the ensuing exchange, has been good for our souls. The generative powers of reflection, exchange with an *intimate*, and the blessed act of writing itself, has brought us closer and allowed each of us to reclaim a once-familiar part of herself. Of course, Ruth-Ellen could have told us that would happen—and she did, all those years ago, when she first set before us, with the excitement of new discovery, the letters and diaries of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German women ... and our first encounter with self-life-writing. We hope that this dialogue offers encouragement to others to carve out time and space for reflection on their own feminist friendships.

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## Chapter 9

# Writing that Matters



# Writing that Matters: An E-pistolary Dialogue

## Angelika Bammer

Emory University

## Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres

University of Minnesota

**Angelika Bammer** is Professor of Comparative Literature at Emory University. The editor of *Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question* (1994) and co-editor, with Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres, of *The Future of Scholarly Writing: Critical Interventions* (2015), she has published on twentieth-century literature and culture, film and photography, and utopian thought. Her book *Born After: A German Reckoning* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), a study of the transmission of history across four generations in the form of a personal narrative, was a PROSE Award Finalist.

**Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres** is Professor Emerita of German and Women Studies at the University of Minnesota, where she worked from 1976 until her retirement in 2013. She is the 2004 recipient of the University of Minnesota's Ada Comstock Distinguished Women Scholars Award. In addition to authoring many articles and book publications on feminist German Studies, language and genre, feminist studies, and writing, she also co-edited *The Future of Scholarly Writing: Critical Interventions* (2015) with Angelika Bammer and served as co-editor (together with Barbara Laslett) of *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* from 1990–1995 and of the *Women in German Yearbook* from 2002–2004

## **Preface 1: To Ruth-Ellen (from Angelika)**

Dear Ruth-Ellen,

Sitting down to write you again, as I have so many times before, evokes a flood of memories and a deep awareness of times shared—and time passing. I remember how we started out (so many years ago now ... I lose count!), excited to the point of giddy, to discover that we were kindred spirits in many ways. We discovered that we both believed passionately in the creative potential of academic writing and that we both wanted to do what we could to increase that potential. We decided to work together toward that end. The piece below tells of how we started. It was the beginning, not just of deeply rewarding collaborative work, but of an equally rewarding growing friendship. As friends we shared in the ups and downs, the joys and griefs of our private lives. When we had something to celebrate, a loss to mourn, a puzzlement to sort out, or just a story that needed telling, we would call or write or send a message. But whatever life concerns we shared, we never stopped talking about writing. Work and life for us, in writing, were inseparable.

We didn't set out to write a book, but somewhere along the way, a book emerged. Over countless emails, many long phone calls, and occasional visits to our respective homes—you came to Atlanta, I went to St. Paul—our book, *The Future of Scholarly Writing: Critical Interventions*, started taking shape. I'll never forget how proud and happy we were when it was finished and we finally held the product of our work in our hands. It was beautiful and it felt meaningful. Not only had we made it together, but it reflected our vision of what academic writing could be, freed of the constraints that inhibited its flourishing.

This Festschrift to honor and celebrate you returns me full circle to our beginning, to the first piece that you and I co-wrote. And it turns a setback into our good fortune. For, as it happened, that first piece we wrote was never published. It didn't fit the criteria of the existing scholarly journals: it was either too personal (to wit, "not scholarly enough"), or too unconventional in form, or the length was wrong.

We finally realized it would remain unpublished unless we found a fitting venue someday. When the call came for this Festschrift in your honor, I knew we had finally reached that day.

Looking back over the duration of our work together, I see how profoundly it has shaped what I do. It clarified and deepened my commitments: to intellectual work that nourishes creative energies; to a feminist politics that honors process; to the life-sustaining power of friendship. The future we envision lies in those commitments. That future is one you helped me see.

With love and abiding gratitude,

*Angelika*

## **Preface 2: To Our Readers (from Ruth-Ellen and Angelika)**

The following piece began as a presentation at the annual meeting of the Coalition of Women in German (WiG)—a professional association of feminist scholars and teachers in the field of German literature, language, and cultural studies—in October 2007. One of the sessions at that year’s conference was on “The Creative Possibilities of Academic Writing,” a subject in which both of us were passionately interested. We had questions about scholarly writing throughout our academic careers; we had taught courses and published on the subject. This was a chance to extend that inquiry and focus it through the lens of gender, bringing a feminist perspective to bear on the discussion. We quickly realized that we had much in common—we were asking many of the same questions and approaching them in a similar way—so we proposed a joint presentation for the conference session.

The form, we decided, would be a dialogue. Not only was it a practical way to exchange ideas, back and forth, but it was also a form that struck us as much more compatible with a feminist approach—a process of what we called “thinking together,” allowing different voices and perspectives to intersect—than the conventional academic form of a monologue. And so, a lively email exchange began with Angelika writing from Atlanta (where she taught at Emory University) and Ruth-Ellen writing from St. Paul in the Twin Cities (where she taught at the University of Minnesota). We easily agreed on our framing questions: (1) How did gender inform *the things we wrote about* in our work as scholars (our assumption was

that it did)? (2) How might a feminist approach affect *the ways we wrote* (could it offer an alternative to normative forms of scholarly writing, or at least as a productive critique)?

With that, we were off and writing: our e-pistolary dialogue was underway. We began almost immediately with stories, with comments on our experiences as academic writers and editors over the years, and with the growing realization that bringing a gender perspective to bear on these matters was not only timely, but critical. Our initial stories soon gave way to a broader discussion on a number of topics that were as universal and sweeping as the stories had been particular: the complex relationships between thinking, knowing, and writing; between who we write as and whom we write for; between the art and the science of scholarly writing; between writing and our sense of self. We shared the conviction that writing intentionally, both as feminists and as women, was not just critical for us professionally, but necessary for us to survive. We drew on a range of critical theories, but the rich reservoir of thought and debate within Second Wave feminisms on issues like power and the gender of language, the notion of a feminine or womanly form of writing (or, as French feminists called it, an *écriture féminine*), and the creative potential of *writing otherwise*. The work of writers, theorists, scholars, and poets like Adrienne Rich, Hélène Cixous, Barbara Christian, Alice Walker, Sheila Rowbotham, Christa Wolf, and Luce Irigaray (and there were many others) had inspired and challenged both of us to think critically and creatively about what we write about, how we write, and what our writing does: what it does for our readers, what it does in the world, what it does to us. We both agreed that this work was not done yet. Its potential had not yet been realized, and its critique not yet fully absorbed. That's where we began.

By the time we realized that we had to stop and collect our thoughts into the shape of a conference presentation, we had over seventy type-written pages of emails. We edited them so that our framing questions could create a sense of coherence among the parts. At the same time, we wanted to preserve the particular modality of email discourse: sometimes fragmentary, often discontinuous, ranging across different voices as well as different registers and modes.

Sometimes we were analytical, sometimes emotional, sometimes theoretical, political, or philosophical. But always, in one way or another, what we wrote was personal. For that reason, we kept our emails as we had written them (albeit in redacted form), including the chronological order in which they had been written.

We kept this dialogue form for our conference presentation. Standing side by side, each with our own microphone, each reading from her own email, we addressed each other: “Dear Ruth-Ellen” ... “Dear Angelika.” When we were finished, there was a moment of expectant silence, followed by tumultuous applause, as people jumped to their feet, clapping, cheering, laughing, and even crying. Afterwards, they lined up with one or the other of us to comment and continue the discussion. Clearly, we had touched a nerve. For us this marked the beginning of a journey—intellectual, personal, and professional—that would lead to new ways of writing, new ways of teaching, and new ways of advising and mentoring.

The dialogue we had begun continued, expanding over time to include colleagues, in our own and other fields, at our own and other institutions, in our own country and abroad, on scholarly writing, the norms and conventions of academic disciplines, and the creative possibilities of writing differently. What had begun as a dialogue between the two of us eventually became a multi-voiced dialogue among a group of scholars in a broad, multidisciplinary range of fields. In 2015 we published it as *The Future of Scholarly Writing: Critical Interventions*.

In a way, with the publication of our book, we had come full circle, returning to the questions that we had begun with when we wrote our conference proposal: “What makes our writing powerful? What makes it true? What makes it pleasurable?” But in another way, we had expanded the discussion to explore ways of writing that we hadn’t yet thought of or hadn’t yet dared to try. This piece is part of that exploration.

Carolyn Steedman concludes her contribution to *The Future of Scholarly Writing* with a reflection on the future from her perspective as an academic scholar in the field of history. “I must find a new way of writing history that I don’t yet know,” she writes and her love of poetry notwithstanding, it will not be poetry. The constraints, the limitations, are real: “I will not now write in a condition of freedom,” she goes on, “(how could I have thought I would?).” Yet while freedom as such still remains a utopian ideal, the horizon of possibilities lies open. And within that scope, Steedman concludes, “I may, with great good fortune, find the means to write ... in a form that I do not yet know” (226).

That we find such means, whether with “great good fortune” or through trial and error and the courage to experiment, is our wish for all of us—ourselves, and you, our readers.



## Atlanta, September 11

Dear Ruth-Ellen,

I'm just going to jump in wildly and start writing. There's no obvious place to begin. It's late, after midnight already in Atlanta, but the conference is just five weeks out and I'm aware of time fleeting. When on earth will we have time to write our piece, much less write it in ways that matter, if we don't start now?

So, let's start writing, get a stream of emails going and trust that something will emerge and take shape in the process. I'll begin with a story to get things going.

Today in my freshmen class we were discussing a short story by Ursula LeGuin, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," when one of the young women in the class said very spontaneously that she "loved the way LeGuin writes." "So, write like that," I responded. They all looked at me and I could see them wondering, is she serious? I was. "If you find ways of writing that you like," I said, "why not write that way yourself? Or some other way that you might like to practice?"

Most of my students know how they are supposed to write. They've been taught the rules. So have we for most of the things that we write. Yet I often think that this way of writing by the rules kills something in us. Something dies along the way when we write just by the rules, something alive and vulnerable and true within us, and in its stead comes this dead-weight language where the thoughts and feelings have become like something petrified. Heavy, wooden, lifeless, frightened.

Perhaps that's why I've always had this somewhat guilty obsession with reading acknowledgments and dedications. There's a prurient interest of course—it's the academic's pared-down version of the gossip column—but it's more than that, I think. It's often in the acknowledgments that I get the clearest and most vivid sense of why this was written in the first place, whom it was written for, and what it took, what it cost, to write it. We like to theorize about writing from the margins, but we want to be at the center as well. So, it's often in our more personal, less conventionally "academic," writing that we come closest to our truth. It's a risk that you and I are taking in these emails. Instead of relegating our reasons for writing to the

periphery—the call for papers, the proposal, the prefatory thank-you—we put why and how we write front and center. There’s a gender dimension to this, but I’m not yet able to identify or name it.

I’m tired now. More soon. Write back and I’ll respond. We’ll see where all this takes us.

*Love, Angelika*

### **St. Paul, September 13**

Hi, my dear,

Now that the morning emergencies have been tended to, I am finally able to sit down and respond to you! What a wonderful feeling that is. What you wrote set off resonances in me because much of what you say I think and have thought too. Especially about acknowledgments: I have been reading them for years and go, in fact, first to them when I open a book. Maybe some of this is the result of something that happened to me with the Louise Otto book I did for Fischer in the 80s. I wrote a long acknowledgment talking not only about my relationship with Louise Otto over the years but also about the complexities of doing that book, which got even more fraught in the last summer before it was due when I broke my foot badly and spent the summer going up and down the stairs on my bottom at the Institute for Research in the Humanities in Madison where I had an office space, and being dropped off and picked up by Erhard, still a husband at that point, sitting sideways in the back seat of the car, which was the only way I could fit with the huge cast.... Anyway, I eventually sent the manuscript off to the editor, who got back to me with the recommendation that I have a native German speaker go through my language since it seemed not academic enough to her. So I went, for some unknown reason, to a German colleague of mine, who agreed to help out but who in turn got back to me with the news that he certainly didn’t like the acknowledgments at all and had taken out all personal elements. I was too scared about the whole project to object, and just went with his recommendations (which, in the case of the German, involved mainly sticking in words like *plakatieren*, which I had never heard of).

Your story to start this dialogue off is perfect. In fact, that you begin with stories is indicative of what we are talking about: “stories” are as “marginal” to academic writing as acknowledgments; they are considered anecdotes, a word that is often used in contempt, not in

admiration. Anecdotes are by definition particular. Yet they pull me in, make me think, help me to respond and to understand. And isn't that what we are supposed to be doing?

As to a gender dimension, I guess we immediately run into essentialism, don't we? My colleague's transformation of my chatty acknowledgments into something totally freed of the personal might have occurred had a female version of him been working on my language, but I still suspect that most women—eek, here I go—would get what I was about in those acknowledgments and mourn the change, the complicity that I then engaged in by permitting such a change.

*love, re*

### **Atlanta, September 18**

Dear Ruth-Ellen,

Women get into this language power game as much as men do. Your story reminded me of something I experienced at a feminist conference organized by women some years back. It was in Hamburg, Germany, May 1986, the Third Annual Women in Literature Conference. I had been invited to give one of the plenary addresses. The title of my talk was "Dissolving Beards and Bearded Women: Power, Authority, and Academic Discourse" ("Schmelzende Bärte und bärtige Frauen: Macht, Autorität und akademischer Diskurs"). The beard image came from Roland Barthes. In "Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers" Barthes describes how adopting the persona of "professor" makes him feel. It feels, he writes, as if he has glued a fake beard on to look the part, but when the performance of professor starts—when he has to give a lecture or stand in front of a class—the spit from his words runs down and the beard comes unglued and he stands there, a beardless object of ridicule, exposed as a fraud.

I talked about the power trips that academic language fosters and how we as feminists needed to be aware of and ready to critique this power. For without such critical self-consciousness, I argued, we risked turning language as a weapon against ourselves, using it against—not for—one another.

Before I left for Hamburg, when I was writing my talk, feminist friends back home had (first jokingly, then seriously) suggested that

I wear a fake beard when I gave my plenary, gradually letting it come unglued while I was talking until I would stand there at the end, exposed—as me! I had actually considered it, but in the end (and I must say I've always regretted this) I felt too vulnerable. And I didn't want to let that show.

Yet I remember looking out at that huge roomful of people, mostly women, and thinking—*knowing*—that what I was saying was true. And it felt important to say it. I thought of the feminist thinkers who had inspired and taught me, showing me new ways to think about language, writing, and voice. There was Audre Lorde, Christa Wolf, Cherrie Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, Verena Stefan, Monique Wittig, Sheila Rowbotham, and Hélène Cixous. And always, like a light in darkness, there was Adrienne Rich. They wrote of speaking truth to power, of writing that could save our lives, of using language to express our selves. The response to my talk was overwhelming. Everyone stood up when I was done, and they clapped and clapped.

Yet from the conference organizers, afterwards: nothing. No comments, no response, absolute silence. It was eerie. They said nothing about my presentation, and I felt a huge sense of shame. It was as if I'd been crossed out. And in a sense, I had been. The talks were supposed to be published in a journal, but when I submitted mine, it was relegated (in abridged form, no less) to an internal newsletter of the sponsoring organization, *Frauen in der Literaturwissenschaft* (Women in Literary Studies).

So now, as you raise the question of how and if the relationship between language and power is a gendered one, all of this comes back to me and I think, yes, of course, it is. But it's not a matter of identity (man or woman) or positionality (who I am speaking as). Rather, it's a matter of underlying systems of value and institutional structures of power that are themselves, from the get-go, gendered.

I play with power when I talk or write and make choices: say, to use verbs instead of nouns, shift to an anecdote, use affective rather than merely analytic terms. One set of choices can make me feel credentialed, empowered, authorized, while another can make me feel the opposite: uncredentialed, of questionable authority, naked. That's where fear and shame come in. Of what exactly? Of being inadequate, not having what it takes? Perhaps to some extent. (There, we're back to the glued-on beard....) But I think it reveals a deeper ambivalence. On the one hand, we want to be recognized and rewarded: the pat on the head for the smart girl. On the other hand, we resent the price we have to pay for that pat.

The difference between talking as someone and talking *to* someone is relevant here. When I talk as someone, I'm not talking to anyone in particular. I am posturing, assuming a persona (who may not even be me). But when I talk *to* someone, the focus changes. I am aware of the other person listening. It's not just about me, or even just about them. It's about the possibility of communication between us.

I often make my students address their papers to a particular audience. To somebody. "Anybody," I tell them. "Just not nobody, as if you didn't care if anyone were listening." At that moment, when it becomes intentional communication, that's where fear—but also the excitement—of writing comes in. For I am putting myself out there as the person writing this, exposing what I think and value and feel. And when I write that way, I want you—who are reading—to listen and hear me.

Of course, that's also when my writing makes me feel vulnerable. What if it's seen as petty, or stupid, or offends someone? Would that mean that I'm a petty, stupid, or offensive person? No wonder theory is so seductive. We can hide our small, subjective selves behind some big, impressive words and feel protected.

### **St. Paul, September 20**

Dear Angelika,

You write about "gender" in your story about the Hamburg conference or my story about the editor and for some reason, the word "betrayal" comes to mind. I am sure you are right that the academy trains us all in what constitutes power. I also know that no matter how infuriated and almost speechless I become when I read about academic men being rude or dismissive in their displays of power, I expect it somehow. Whereas when the editor or the *Frauen in der Literaturwissenschaft* organizers do what they do, I am overwhelmed by something far stronger, a sense of betrayal. I feel abandoned, alone.

There is not only gender in all of what we are writing about, there is also politics. Whom do we want to reach with our words? Is it possible for us to write and to be heard and accepted/validated by academics AND others? And isn't that vital contact and connection what academic feminists in particular should be striving for?

...

Yesterday I participated in a demonstration for the AFSCME workers who are on strike. A lovely sunny day. A large group of students and faculty and a few workers gathered in front of the main administration building where the Prez sits. He had complained that he couldn't get his work done because of all the noise outside. We gathered, hoisted signs, whatever, and were absolutely silent for a half hour. No words, just sounds of birds and a breeze—it felt like a Quaker meeting to me, I had time to think, to ponder, to look around. At some point, two young women just began to dance. We had been told to yell as loud as we could for one minute following the silence. That was also glorious. Then somebody began banging a drum and we all chanted FAIR PAY for awhile. And then I went back for my office hour and my seminar. By the time I got home, I was too tired to do anything.

But I do remember one thought I had. When the young women began to dance, I felt like weeping, not out of sadness so much as reacting to something beautiful. And I thought about what we do in the best of ways: we point out beauty, we get people to pay attention to it in all its forms, verbal and otherwise.

### **Atlanta, September 20**

Dear Ruth-Ellen,

A lot of writing that I come across, especially standard academic writing, is so dispiriting to me for the very reason that it's so unbeautiful. It not only lacks any sense of beauty, but it also doesn't even seem to miss it or feel that something is wrong. Writing that matters, I think, should be beautiful in a way that was true to what it was saying. What this means is that beauty isn't about being decorative, a pleasing appearance. It's about getting at the truth, cutting to the heart of things. And that kind of beauty can make us feel like crying ... as you did when you saw the women dancing. Yet everything that I've been taught about what matters in academic writing is the opposite: you're not supposed to touch or move people. You're not supposed to be funny. And God forbid, you should make them cry. The aim is not feeling but thinking. Craft your argument, make your point. That's it. Writing that refuses such an

either/or choice, that wants to make us feel and not just think, is—within this framework—considered suspect, if not embarrassing.

### **St. Paul, September 22**

I remember a conversation where you used the word “seduction” to describe the effect of theory on you, and I realized then that we are different in that way. I was happy to see Barbara Christian splitting up “theory” and “theorizing,” because I do see great usefulness in talking about ideas and working out things together. But I am super-sensitive to even the sound of theory, or maybe more accurately the jargon of theory. Much of it is such harsh and ugly language. Most of all, I cannot make what feels like the requisite step of withdrawing from the world to engage in what I see as the practice of something so often separate from that world. I can’t think of anything much in my life that can be just for fun, like a pastime, which is what purely theoretical discussions frequently sound like to me. Especially since 2000 I have become increasingly grim when I look around me and see all that is wrong, evil, when I see encroaching fascism in this country, hardly even “encroaching,” so close it’s almost here. I find theory so far from seductive, I cannot tell you —

### **Atlanta, September 27**

Dear Ruth-Ellen,

There’s something about the need for connection that’s at issue here. What I love to read is writing that acknowledges me as a participant. That invites a response. When I’m reading certain kinds of theory, or writing in a very abstract mode myself, it feels like the opposite. There is no interlocutor, no other position outside the text itself; it is contained within itself, a disembodied monologue. When I have written like that, I have caught myself thinking, “I hope no one reads this.”

Of course, that sounds completely absurd (why am I writing if not to be read?), and even as I’m thinking it, I realize the absurdity. But it makes emotional sense: a certain kind of language can feel so removed from the person I experience myself to be in other contexts, that what I’m writing (the words and thoughts that I’m putting down) and what I’m thinking can feel disconnected, as if a cord has been cut. The words almost seem to generate their own

thoughts, like a code that someone else programmed. I don't own my writing anymore and don't know if I want to claim it. It's as if the person I feel I am has been replaced by some other person I think I ought to be and I'm adrift in a sea of words I no longer control. I no longer know what I wanted to communicate when I started writing. Instead of writing with a sense of a relationship between myself and my imagined readers, I am writing as if no one is listening anymore. My writing has become a performance, and I'm worried about how I'll be perceived. How will I sound? What will they think of me? How will they judge me? No wonder I wish that no one were looking.

Yet I know that there are other ways of writing that create connection. The way you and I are writing here is one example.

Another is an experience I had some years ago, when I went on a trip to South Africa. I had been invited to give a talk on my work on history and memory and difficult pasts at the famous District Six Museum in Cape Town. I was trying to write my talk and it wasn't going well. I felt blocked and was getting more and more nervous until I finally froze up completely. Not a single word was coming out. I would sit at the computer, despairing. I had no idea anymore why they had invited me, what I might want to tell them, or what they might want to hear. I had lost any sense of connection between me and them. I kept thinking, why would they care about what some white European woman academic had to say about history and memory and difficult pasts, when they were struggling with their own past, engaged in the work of making history now? I imagined them looking at me with polite disinterest. Why *would* they be interested in me? All I saw was myself in the spotlight. And in the glare of that spotlight, I froze.

Something had to give. So, one day I decided to imagine what it would feel like to meet these people in District Six, people whose work as anti-Apartheid activists I had read about and admired deeply. I imagined them taking the time to come to the museum and hear me talk that evening. I imagined being in the same room with them, talking with them, hearing their stories and sharing mine, learning more about our different histories. At that, something fundamental shifted: as I changed perspective, I was no longer focused on myself and on what I might have to say. Instead, I was focused on them: on what they might be interested in hearing me talk about, on what I had that they might find useful. I went to the computer and started writing. "Imagine this," I began, as I told them the story of a memorial I had come across by accident in Berlin and

what this discovery had meant to me. Suddenly there were all these things I wanted to tell them, and I was eager to hear what they had to say. It was about a relationship between us, our shared interests across different histories and what we could learn from each other along the way.

### **St. Paul, September 28**

My dear Angelika,

What you are saying is that without a recipient, an interlocutor, whatever, we are writing into an empty place. That's one thing. But it is the other part that you slide into that grabs me, namely, writing with no aim of communication seems to occur when we are embarrassed in some way, self-conscious, not in a consciousness-of-self good way, but rather in dread, embarrassment, in a deep concern NOT about what we are saying, but about what the others will say in response and how we will be perceived. The implications of that have my mind leaping about, from John Berger in *Ways of Seeing* on how women act and how they are perceived, how they look and how they are looked at messing up their minds—to my own enormous connection with what you are saying.

And think of the sadness of it all: that our living, which involves communicating all the time with others, students and colleagues, can be so marked by a sense of wanting not to be seen, of wanting to hide, while at the same time—and here, at least in me, is where the falseness comes in—wanting to please those who are being addressed. Saying the right words—using the right jargon—trying not to provoke. Lord. I can barely even write all this down, I am stumbling along here, feeling more than thinking.

And all of this is vitally connected to writing that matters! It would seem, in fact, that writing that does not matter is that which is not written to others, that which either mouths others in ways that erase ourselves or is so timid and cautious or well-behaved that whatever we actually think disappears.

Thank you for this, my dear.

Dearest Ruth-Ellen,

We are getting at something here that feels deeply and frighteningly true, and it has to do with gender, with that perverse dimension of our learned behavior that has us, on the one hand, wanting “to please ... trying not to provoke,” and, on the other hand, “wanting not to be seen ... wanting to hide.” Your email from earlier today takes us back to these words about the ambivalent authority of power that Roland Barthes explored in his essay, “Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers,” and that I tried to expose in my Hamburg talk on the word *beards* we don to gain recognition. I can’t stop thinking about Barthes’s words and what they mean to us as academic women. What they evoke for me—in such a vivid way that I can almost see her—is a girl who is confused and frightened. She wants to please. She wants to avoid provoking (at least no more than she is already doing simply by being there, taking up space, taking up time, speaking her mind, saying what she knows and wants and notices). But—and this is the kicker—she doesn’t just want to please by being a good and dutiful girl and saying what is expected of her, she also wants to hide, to remain unseen, to go unnoticed. Is she afraid of what will be done to her if she attracts attention? Which should she choose: being punished because she’s too much out there or being ignored because she can’t be seen? Either way, she’s at risk. She does not feel safe.

What have we touched here? Our talk about writing has led us somewhere dark and twisted. Perhaps this is where our previous thoughts about fear, shame, and betrayal in relation to writing link up with other sets of experiences—of danger, abuse, and neglect—that in some deep and unconscious way inform the experience of being female in our culture.

**Atlanta, September 29**

Dear Ruth-Ellen,

In your email this morning—after the worrying time with your sick kitty Marlitt, your meddling neighbor and her callous comments, and the painful phone call from your son—you mentioned (twice in fact) that you felt bad to be interrupting our correspondence for these life issues. Your words startled me. Initially, they reminded me of the insistence, voiced so strongly and angrily in Second Wave feminist

thought, that our work was not only constantly interrupted, it was *structured as interruptible*, and it was for this structural reason, not because of some fault of ours, that we could never fully focus on it, devote our full attention to it, put *work* above the annoying intrusions of *life*. The reason we couldn't excel and advance like men—this was the feminist argument at the time—was because we were continually being interrupted by all this life stuff: a suffering pet, a troubled child, an aging parent. Moreover, we were complicit in our own lack of discipline (which is how our interruptibility was, of course, perceived) because we permitted it: we had been socialized to be caretakers and be available when others needed us. That was the womanly way. One feminist response to this socialization was to reject it. We should refuse to always be available, always interruptible, to arrange our time according to others' needs. Attending to others, while ignoring our selves ... this had to stop!

But you know what? I've never really wanted to stop it. Taking the cat to the vet, making a birthday special for my children, mentoring students who needed extra guidance ... all of these things of course took time. And you could say that they took time away from what we academics like to describe as "our own work"—our research and writing work (as if the other things we do were someone else's work!?). But that's not how I experienced it. And who determines which work is the work that matters, anyway?

That's why your words, your almost-apology for interrupting our work to address "life issues," startled me. There was nothing "bad," as you put it, about that interruption. On the contrary. One of the things about our correspondence that I've particularly loved is how the many aspects of our lives—the professional and the personal, the political and the philosophical, the mundane and the sublime—were all part of our reflections about writing. They all informed our sense of what kind of writing mattered and what mattered to us as we wrote. In the process, *we created a new form of writing*. Double-voiced and non-linear in structure, operating on several different planes at once, it pursues its inquiry in a discontinuous, interruptible form that allows for sidetracks, backtracks, interjections, and what in film are called jump-cuts, even as its main line of inquiry stays focused. And to me this kind of writing, as we have been practicing it here, is made richer by the interruptions, not poorer.

When I described what we were doing—structuring our paper in the form of emails—to a friend of mine in Anthropology, she said that a book in her field had just been published that used email form. It's

called *Improvising Theory* and I've just ordered it. Perhaps a new genre is emerging and we are part of the process. The horizon of possibilities lies open.

### **St. Paul, September 29**

Dear Angelika,

Work is often the thing that saves my life these days, mainly because it distracts me from other less good things. I know I am confusing the issue here, and I know exactly what you mean about seeing the things that interrupt us in our work as being somehow bad, the reason for our not being more stunning scholars or whatever—but maybe it is because I really had to fight to get a job in the first place, finishing my PhD at a time when there were no jobs or postdocs in our field and moving then to Madison with my then-husband, who had found a job, and feeling as if the things that interrupted my work were now the dominant and most important things in my role as a wife and, by then, a mother. And I was enormously unhappy for quite a while. Some of that no doubt has hung on in me—but my saying that I regretted interrupting our exchanges with my cat Marlitt's decline was speaking the truth. Only this *work* we are doing feels like a lot more, something increasingly vital and essential to me.

### **Atlanta, September 29**

I don't remember exactly when and how we decided to call this dialogue between us "Writing that Matters," but I know we were inspired by Arthur Kleinman's book, *What Really Matters: Living a Moral Life Amidst Uncertainty and Danger*. Your emails this morning took me back to that sense of urgency with which we started, when we were asking fundamental questions about our work, in particular our scholarly writing: what it promises us, what it costs us, and what it gives. In a way, this is where we began our exploration of "writing that matters" and I wanted to revisit that starting point. So, I re-read Kleinman's first essay. "Given the manifest shakiness of our lives," he writes, "what is surprising is that we act, think, and write as if we were in control of ourselves and our world. It is our assiduous denial of existential vulnerability and limits that is extraordinary..." (7).

**St. Paul, September 29**

... The “manifest shakiness of our lives,” indeed. Every day feels manifestly shaky to me, and not just right this second.

This backing up, this looking at the whole business of writing that matters, from what is going on in our heads when we are writing, how our thoughts leap hither and yon, from fear to betrayal and who knows where else, seems to have given me the chance for a perspective that I tend to lose sight of once I am actually writing. I suspect I have been hiding for a long time, even from myself: I have focused less on what I am actually thinking, far more on how to write it down.

**St. Paul, October 7**

Dear Angelika,

There is a way in which our emails flow, not necessarily always on track or in any clear linear fashion, but they take their good time and things emerge that delight me, stories that fit, touches of elegant language, everyday matters that had to intervene. At the same time, I remember how I once gave a graduate seminar for Women’s Studies on women’s personal narratives—it was in connection with a research cluster which ultimately presented the conference on personal narratives that produced a good book. The seminar was intended to pull in graduate students from a variety of fields and so we read all kinds of personal narratives, not just the obvious types of biography and autobiography. Anyway, among others we read Marjorie Shostak’s *Nisa*. A considerable number of the students disliked it enormously, felt it was a white girl’s take on an African life—made all the worse because she arranged the material from her transcript into individual chapters with individual topics whereas the transcript itself was chaotic, messy, but—to them—far more “real.” I don’t remember how the discussion went beyond that, but I do know I asked at one point whether they knew of a publisher who would have published seven-hundred pages of raw transcript.

As to how we are writing here—in addition to the beauty/ugliness, trust/betrayal, connection/separation, fear/shame/pleasure themes, I was struck by other recurrent issues: life/death; power (repeated perhaps more than any other word, is that possible?); theory (standing all by its pristine self—but connected with words like bunker, currency, jargon, neurosis, scorn, ugliness,

deprecation); invisibility/ingratiation, connected somehow to pleasing and not provoking with our writing and probably with our speaking as well. There are more. I also noted the way in which we incorporated texts/citations—a sign, I guess, of what it is that we do in our work. Others' writings are what stimulate and restore us, but I also think there is a point at which they too will fade, and we will be faced with the rawness of ourselves and our own words even if, as we know, everything is borrowed from somewhere.

Enough! I need to do other stuff now, but I repeat myself: I am so happy we are doing this. I feel alive again.

How I appreciate you!

Love, Ruth-Ellen

### **Atlanta, October 7**

Dear Ruth-Ellen,

I, too, have been reading through our emails, seeing how we can put them in order for presentation. We will make that order. But even as I am working to think analytically—checking for sequence, coherence, continuity, clarity—I am responding emotionally, laughing and crying as I read. Why? Because at the heart of it all, before and beyond the various issues we discussed, we discovered that what matters, what makes writing matter, is the promise of being heard. Writing that matters always involves more than the writer; it involves her reader. One speaks and the other listens. A connection is made. A dialogue affirms that connection, as our correspondence did. I wrote, you responded. You wrote, I responded. We listened and we heard each other. Writing that matters, then, is writing that signals the desire and willingness to be heard. “Can you hear me,” it asks, “will you listen? I am here. Where are you? Are you out there?” When we read writing informed by this sensibility, we can respond, as you so movingly and beautifully did, “Yes, I hear you. I am out here and I am listening.” I laugh and I cry, because I think that this is what makes life sustainable. That is certainly the case for me. And maybe it applies to all of us as human beings. I think of those stories I've read, of research that shows how people—infants, children, old people, any people—who are ignored, not paid attention to, not heard or noticed, shrink into themselves and emotionally, even physically, die. So, when we write in a way that shows our willingness and need to be responded to, and our willingness

and need to respond in turn, we are affirming the very essence of our desire to live.

I wish you and Marlitt a good night and send love to both of you.

*Angelika*

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Section 4

# **Feminist Mentoring and Mentoring Feminists**





**The entries in this section** reveal deep personal connections to Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres from three different perspectives: of a colleague; a student who stayed in academia; and a student who forged a path outside the academy. Read together, they attest to the impact over a forty-year period that Ruth-Ellen’s teaching, mentoring, and friendship has had on the authors’ personal and professional choices.

Rick McCormick’s contribution details his experiences with Ruth-Ellen over the arc of his own career, from their first meeting at a Coalition of Women in German (WiG) conference to their eventual collaboration as colleagues in the same department at the University of Minnesota. His essay chronicles the mentoring Ruth-Ellen provided and the example she set for him as she shaped the department they shared, and the field of German feminist studies more broadly.

Shawn Jarvis focuses on her discovery, long after grad school, of Ruth-Ellen as a scholar, feminist activist, and theoretician. She reviews Ruth-Ellen’s scholarly production chronologically as a window into her evolution from a young, canonically trained *Germanistin* to a leader in feminist theory and thought. Shawn also reflects on Ruth-Ellen’s legacy as mirrored in the work of her students and advisees.

Sarah Stephens’s entry describes three formative experiences with Ruth-Ellen that influenced her critical thinking, her professional life as an international manager for opera, and her life as a feminist. All her encounters—from her first as a wide-eyed undergraduate with “the new young female professor,” to grad school in the seminar “German Women Writers,” and years later, as Ruth-Ellen mentored her in the delayed completion of her MA—ultimately took her on a journey of feminist choices and led to choosing a feminist life.

Three words dominate this section: *teacher*, *mentor*, and *feminist*. The contributions chronicle how we have evolved together with Ruth-Ellen; what she modeled has become our way of interacting with the world. Each of us whose lives she touched feels her presence in the choices we continue to make.



## Chapter 10

# **Feminist Scholar/Activist, Teacher, Mentor, Colleague, Friend**



# Feminist Scholar/Activist, Teacher, Mentor, Colleague, Friend

## **Rick McCormick**

University of Minnesota

**Rick McCormick**, professor of German, has been teaching German film, media, and culture at the University of Minnesota since 1987. Books: *Sex, Politics, & Comedy: The Transnational Cinema of Ernst Lubitsch* (Indiana University Press, 2020), *Gender and Sexuality in Weimar Modernity: Film, Literature, and “New Objectivity”* (Palgrave, 2001), and *Politics of the Self: Feminism and the Postmodern in West German Literature and Film* (Princeton University Press, 1991). Co-edited volumes: *Legacies of Modernism: Art and Politics in Northern Europe, 1890–1950* (Palgrave, 2007); *German Essays on the Cinema* (Continuum, 2004); and *Gender and German Cinema: Feminist Interventions* (Berg, 1993).

Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres has long been one of the leading feminist scholars in German studies (and beyond), and she has mentored generations of students who have become feminist scholars in our field all over the United States and Canada. But she has also mentored her colleagues: I know, because I am one of them. For over thirty years, she has been a mentor, an ally, and a friend. She empowered the evolution of my scholarship in a feminist direction. She also shaped my department and the field of German studies by her leadership in the hiring of colleagues like Arlene Teraoka and Leslie Morris.

In what follows, I will describe how Ruth-Ellen’s influence on my career and my department parallels her influence on the field of

German feminist studies in general. In doing so, in line both with feminism and Ruth-Ellen's own example, I will mix the personal, the professional, and the political.

I met Ruth-Ellen at the 1985 conference of the Coalition of Women in German (WiG) in Portland, Oregon, organized by Dinah Dodds at Lewis and Clark College. It was my first WiG conference; I was part of a group of graduate students from the German Department at the University of California at Berkeley who rented a car and drove all day long from Northern California to Portland; we were transporting the conference's guest scholar, Luise Pusch, the renowned feminist linguist from West Germany who had just given a talk at Berkeley. The WiG conference paid for the rental car and the gas.

Within a few months, I encountered Ruth-Ellen again. We met at the Modern Language Association (MLA) conference in Chicago in December 1985, my first MLA, and the first time I went on the job market (with barely a chapter of my dissertation written). I saw her at a reception, and I went up and spoke to her; she remembered me and was friendly. This of course was not necessarily what one expected as a graduate student dealing with a senior scholar (this was around the time Ruth-Ellen was promoted to full professor, I believe), but she defied such conventional stereotypes. She was both friendly and encouraging. Little did we know that within two years we would be colleagues.

For that is what happened: at the MLA in New York in December 1986, I had an interview for a job at the University of Minnesota—my dissertation was now finished, I was in a visiting position at New York University, and I had four other interviews. The only campus interview I got was in Minnesota—and much to my surprise, I was offered the job soon after returning to New York. In September 1987 I arrived in Minnesota. The chair of the department at that time was Gerhard Weiss, a pioneer in German studies whose example as a chair and colleague set a humane tone that characterizes my department to this day.

Ruth-Ellen had been in the department since 1976. She loves to tell the anecdote about the job talk she gave on her campus visit: she was discussing a Goethe play from the 1770s that was meant to be sung, *Das Jahrmarktfest zu Plundersweilern*, and at a certain point she actually sang an excerpt from the play. This performance earned her enthusiastic applause from her future colleagues, and Gerhard Weiss was so enamored by it that for years he always mentioned it whenever he spoke to anyone about Ruth-Ellen.

Not too long after I joined the department in 1987, our DAAD Visiting Professor, Heidrun Suhr, invited my spouse Joan Clarkson and me to a dinner party at her apartment across from the Walker Art Center, and Ruth-Ellen and her friend Pamela Mittlefehldt were there. This was the beginning of an alliance that would become a close friendship. Ruth-Ellen and I became allies because at the time we were the only two people in the department who had much interest in feminism. At this point, of course, all I had written was a dissertation that covered some West German novels and films, some of which I considered feminist, whereas Ruth-Ellen was already one of the leading feminist scholars in German studies in North America and Germany.<sup>1</sup> She was also a feminist activist on the campus of the University of Minnesota, involved with both the Department of Women's Studies and the Center for Advanced Feminist Studies (CAFS). CAFS ran an interdisciplinary graduate program, and Ruth-Ellen had served as its director. She encouraged me to get involved in CAFS and to continue my involvement in WiG.

In this way she also served as a model of interdisciplinary scholarship and teaching, as someone who divided her work between the German department and women's studies and CAFS. Indeed, both she and the other prominent member of the "middle" generation of scholars in our department at that time, Jochen Schulte-Sasse, were models of interdisciplinarity in this way to all of us who came later—Jochen with his work in comparative literature and in cultural theory, Ruth-Ellen with her work in women's studies and in feminist theory—and activism. In this sense, they both anticipated the much more broadly interdisciplinary version of German studies that has developed since the 1990s.

Obviously, as a mentor and role model, Ruth-Ellen helped me tremendously. But how could I help her? Well, again, as an ally in the department. In my second year, the German department had a search to hire a full or associate professor. I was selected to be on the search committee; Ruth-Ellen was its chair. We went to the MLA in New Orleans in December 1988. Our goal? To make sure we hired a woman. At that point we were a department of eight men and two women, and the other woman in the department was neither a feminist nor an ally of Ruth-Ellen.

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<sup>1</sup> For insight into Ruth-Ellen's career before she was such a confident feminist, see Shawn Jarvis's chapter in this volume.

At the MLA we interviewed many qualified women scholars. Obviously, there were male applicants as well, and one of them was a major scholar in German studies and comparative literature, and it would have been a major coup for Minnesota to get him. He was irresistible to the search committee and the whole department. What to do? Well, Ruth-Ellen decided to be bold and went to the Dean and asked for two hires, given the quality of the pool. This was an even bigger coup for our department, which certainly helped put us *on the map* in German studies: we hired Jack Zipes, whose work on fairy tales was informed by feminism as well as Marxism, and Arlene Teraoka, who was doing ground-breaking work in a number of areas, including the field of minority literatures in German; indeed, she was examining the position of Turkish German writers. Arlene's work not only expanded the scope of the kind of German studies our department did but pushed the boundaries of German studies throughout the us.

Obviously, for a feminist like Ruth-Ellen, the personal is intertwined with the political—and the professional—which brings me to the 1989 WiG conference in Minnesota. It took place at a convent—I kid you not—on Lake Pepin, which is a vast widening of the Mississippi river between the high bluffs of southeastern Minnesota and western Wisconsin. There was no guest scholar or artist that year, and this was by design. The idea was that WiG would use that conference to take stock of where its members were and where the collective was as a whole. There was a session Ruth-Ellen organized at which different members representing different constituencies spoke about their relationship to WiG. She recruited members to speak, and I was one of them.

As almost the only man at the conference, I opened with a joke that played on the fact that I was (am) bald (and had been since my 20s), saying that I was probably the only one there at WiG who actually needed a wig. Then I went on to talk about the influence of my mother's feminism. Another major presence at WiG then (and now), Sara Lennox from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, wanted Leslie Morris, then a graduate student in Sara's department, to speak, because Leslie was both lesbian and Jewish. Even back then WiG was trying to focus on intersectionality. Leslie spoke, I spoke, and some others spoke.

And then Ruth-Ellen spoke. She took that opportunity to come out as a lesbian to the whole group. As you might imagine, this was moving and cathartic; indeed, it inspired others to share their stories. Coming out was more difficult in the Reagan-Bush era than it would be later. Some of us knew already what Ruth-Ellen had disclosed, of course, but

the fact that she used the WiG conference to make it public was a manifestation of how she felt about the feminist collective that was—that is—WiG.

In 1990, in what was a major coup, Ruth-Ellen and Barbara Laslett from Sociology brought the feminist journal *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* to Minnesota; they would co-edit the journal here for five years. They recruited several younger scholars to serve on the editorial board, and I was one of them, thanks to Ruth-Ellen. Reading manuscripts for articles submitted for consideration at such an interdisciplinary feminist journal and then debating their merits with a feisty bunch of feminist scholars on the editorial board was a formative experience for me.

But back to intersectionality: While Ruth-Ellen was co-editing the journal she became very enthusiastic about an essay that appeared in 1994, “Purity, Impurity, and Separation” by Maria Lugones, in which the author, related her concern with “enmeshed oppressions,” and developed the concept of “curdling.” Ruth-Ellen had all of us, all her friends and students, read this essay, which championed multiplicity over unity, the “impure” over the “pure,” and *mestizaje* over homogeneity. She would organize meetings at her house with graduate students and colleagues to discuss issues like this. Indeed, she also organized meetings of her (many) advisees at her house to discuss their progress on their dissertations, creating a convention that would ultimately be formalized in the department as the dissertation seminar.

When she wasn’t mentoring her many PhD students and helping to re-shape the department, German studies, and feminist studies, Ruth-Ellen was also mentoring me. She taught me to assert myself as a faculty member—indeed, she said to me: “Remember, you are faculty.” Those of us who are or have been faculty know that there are times when each of us feels like a fraud, especially (but not only) early in our careers; she taught me to *own* my status instead. She advised me not merely to submit when more senior colleagues in the department asserted themselves on various issues. Ruth-Ellen was a wise and generous mentor—teaching not only women colleagues to stand up for themselves, but even nerdy guys like me. She supported me when I went up for tenure and later when I was promoted to full professor.

She also befriended Joan and me, and she has remained our dear friend to this day. She hosted parties at her house every four years where friends got together to watch election returns—which ended not very happily in 1988, but better in 1992. Besides politics, Joan and I had more

in common with Ruth-Ellen—another bond we shared was adoption. She had adopted her two children, Timothy and Melissa, in the 1970s; we adopted our two children, Isa and Susana in the 1990s. Every year, Ruth-Ellen would come to our house just before or after Christmas, bringing presents for our kids when they were little. I would build a fire in the fireplace, and we would have tea and short-bread cookies. Each year we gave Ruth-Ellen the Syracuse Cultural Workers' Peace Calendar for the New Year (and we still do).

In the late 1990s our department conducted another major search, and once again Ruth-Ellen and I were allies in our attempt to hire more women. This time we had two positions, and we ended up hiring two women. One of them was an excellent scholar we eventually lost to another university, but the one who has stayed to this day was another scholar who transformed not just our department but the field of German studies: Leslie Morris, whose work in German Jewish studies complemented what Jack Zipes was doing in that area. Leslie would ensure that it became a specialization that would distinguish our department to this day. Her work not only transformed German studies but helped to shape the emerging field of German Jewish studies as well.

It was around this time too that Ruth-Ellen's book *Respectability and Deviance: Nineteenth-Century Women and the Ambiguity of Representation* (1998) was released, a masterful work that was the culmination of the exhaustive scholarship—research and analysis—she had done on nineteenth-century German women writers, demonstrating the expertise in that field that she had developed over her career. She was honored for this book on campus—being recognized as a Scholar of the College in the College of Liberal Arts in 1999. Five years later, she received a university-wide honor, the Ada Comstock Distinguished Women's Scholars Award.

Ruth-Ellen's work on nineteenth-century German women writers has created an impressive scholarly legacy that cannot be ignored. Much of her work included interdisciplinary feminist collaboration, such as the 1986 book she co-edited with University of Minnesota historian Mary Jo Maynes, *German Women in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries: A Social and Literary History*. Her work on personal narratives and the essay must also be mentioned: *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives* (1989), a book that was the collective product of the Personal Narratives Group, composed of a number of feminist scholars at the University of Minnesota; *Revising the Word and the World: Essays in Feminist Literary Criticism* (1993),

which she co-edited with VèVè A. Clark and Madelon Sprengnether; and *The Politics of the Essay: Feminist Perspectives* (1993), co-edited with Elizabeth (Liz) Mittman.<sup>2</sup>

Ruth-Ellen's scholarly legacy also includes the many scholars and teachers whose dissertations she advised. Some of them went on to become experts themselves in German literature of the late eighteenth, nineteenth century, and early twentieth century, but many wrote dissertations on topics far beyond that range. Many of the leading scholars in the field of feminist German studies were advised and mentored by Ruth-Ellen.<sup>3</sup>

In the great amount of service and leadership Ruth-Ellen has provided the profession, much has been as an editor—co-editing *Signs*, as mentioned above, but also co-editing the *Women in German Yearbook* (2002–2004), which is now called *Feminist German Studies*. And in doing such editorial work, she developed an allergy to obscure academic/theoretical jargon in scholarly writing.<sup>4</sup> Her campaign on this front led ultimately to the book she co-edited with Angelika Bammer, *The Future of Scholarly Writing: Critical Interventions* (2015). Ruth-Ellen retired in 2013, but she is still motivated by an intense interest in questions about how one writes: how should one write as a scholar and as a human being, how should one mix the personal with the scholarly, how should one write a personal narrative or a memoir?

On the personal front, the untimely death of Ruth-Ellen's son Timothy in Guatemala in 2010 was a loss that caused Ruth-Ellen great grief, the kind of loss from which a parent can never fully recover. But she remains close to her daughter Melissa and to Melissa's children Ashley and Brittany. And Ashley's daughter, Ruth-Ellen's great granddaughter, the amazing Victoria, brings her so much joy.

Ruth-Ellen no longer organizes election parties every four years, but that tradition has been continued by our colleague Leslie Morris and her wife Shevvy Craig (a professor in our English department). Nonetheless, Ruth-Ellen remains as politically engaged as ever, as many

2 For an extensive list of her work, see the bibliography of Ruth-Ellen's publications in the appendices of this volume.

3 See the bibliography of dissertations advised by Ruth-Ellen in the appendices of this volume.

4 For more detail on the boldness of Ruth-Ellen's campaign against academic jargon—and the controversy it engendered—see Shawn Jarvis's chapter in this volume. The joint contribution by Angelika Bammer and Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres in this volume also delves further into the topic of academic writing.

of her friends can testify, those of us who get her frequent, urgent emails with petitions to sign and links to articles in many newspapers, journals, and blogs (*The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *The New Yorker*, *The London Review of Books*, etc., etc.).

She is a dear friend to many across North America and in Europe (Boston, Sacramento, Arizona, Germany, England, Slovenia). Those not near receive her emails, and those in the Twin Cities area meet her for lunch—lovely, long lunches filled with conversation on so many topics, personal, professional, and political. How many wonderful lunches have I enjoyed with Ruth-Ellen at various cafes: at Cupcake, at T-Rex, at Nina's. Together we also would visit our dear colleague, Gerhard Weiss, before he passed away in October 2019 at 93. How we miss him. And Ruth-Ellen remains a generous mentor, willing to read the introduction to my Lubitsch manuscript and offer feedback and encouragement.

On October 10, 2019, there was an op-ed by Ruth Whippman in the *New York Times* titled “Enough Leaning In. Let’s Tell Men to Lean Out.” Whippman argued that instead of women being encouraged to “lean in” and become more like men—indeed, like aggressive, “alpha males”—men should be encouraged to “lean out” and become more like women—nurturing and collaborative. As a man who has long been inspired by feminism, I can say that this message resonated with me; the idea that women should become more like men—if that meant being more like the aggressive, arrogant jerks who have done the most damage in the history of our planet—never appealed to me.

Obviously, it is a mixture of traits stereotypically gendered as feminine or masculine that are needed in any human being who aspires to doing good work in the world. Scholar, teacher, activist, feminist pioneer, mentor, ally, friend—all of this is combined in Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres. An example to so many, an example to me.

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# Chapter 11

## **Tea with R.E.**



## Shawn C. Jarvis

St. Cloud State University

**Shawn C. Jarvis** was the second student to finish a PhD (1990) with Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres. During her graduate studies she worked in East and West German archives and published two editions of writings by Gisela von Arnim. Her continued work with nineteenth-century German women's fairy tales produced two anthologies, *The Queen's Mirror* (U of Nebraska P, 1999 with Jeannine Blackwell) and *Im Reich der Wünsche* (Beck, 2012). Other publications have also been in fairytale studies. She retired in 2018 from St. Cloud State University after thirty years of teaching all levels of German. Her retirement energies are devoted to three grandchildren, who all speak German!

It was early April and I had just arrived for tea. I expected it to be a lovely, indulgently inconsequential morning of giggles and reminiscences, like so many previous get-togethers. As she pattered around the kitchen, starting the kettle and offering me various tea options, Ruth-Ellen was effusive and energized by recent events. I, on the other hand, was worried and had been mulling for days about a topic for this collection that would be a fitting tribute to her. But then, she began to talk about her life as a feminist scholar and I suddenly realized *her* reflections would be the stuff of my contribution. Below you find my reconstruction of her comments that morning and see what the conversation led to, as I reflect here on the arc of Ruth-Ellen's career, her impact on the academy and feminist scholarship, and our very own *Werdegänge*.

Ruth-Ellen had just returned from a luncheon the day before, celebrating the history of the Women's Studies program at the

University of Minnesota and the Center for Advanced Feminist Studies, where she was the first director (1984–87). She had given a talk about the inception of the Center and the ideas and goals behind it, along with a brief overview of her time in the world of feminist thought, theorizing, and political action. That led to the recounting of her co-editorship of *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* from 1990–1995, which she called the best academic experience and the most important thing she had done in her career. It had been a heady time, both literally and figuratively.

As she described it to me that morning, the *Signs* experience was so exciting “it made you sick.” The goals Ruth-Ellen (a literary critic and Germanist) and her co-editor Barbara Laslett (a sociologist) had for their five-year stint as editors were to make the journal interdisciplinary, international, and inclusive. Ruth-Ellen also had a broader agenda: to challenge feminist writing itself. Despite Laslett’s reservations, she penned a 1992 editorial “On Writing Feminist Academic Prose,” where she called for feminists to consider the forms and language they use to communicate and warned about the paradoxical potential of becoming, instead of insurgent, just another part of the academic establishment. The piece caused something of an academic kerfuffle (East Coast elites vs. Midwestern wanna-be’s) and the ensuing “snide, gossipy *Verriss*” of her ideas as “anti-intellectualism” in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (McMillan sec. A) was something she said she never really got over (although somebody got a dissertation topic out of it!).

I asked her why she wrote the editorial, when she knew it was certain to cause a stir: she said it was because she had a platform to discuss something she felt strongly about. She wanted to talk about feminism and “rituals of degradation.” (If you read her other editorials from that period, you’ll find her frequently revisiting this topic.)

I asked her how she came to feminism: it was a “rescue” of sorts, she said, while she was taking care of kids, working on her dissertation (with a broken arm and a microphone) and leading the life of the wife of an established academic. She found refuge with a group of women engaging in “consciousness raising” (quaint-sounding today, but revolutionary in the 1970s). She said it was good to be with women who were nice to each other and collegial. She also talked about others who were not.

Over the course of the afternoon, I realized how little I actually knew about the scope of Ruth-Ellen’s academic life and scholarly output, her intellectual life as a specialist in German women’s literary, social, and

cultural history, and her influence as a feminist theorist. I had finished my Master's in 1980, was in Germany for two years, and then worked off campus on my PhD—so I missed most of the developments I describe here. Sure, we'd had lots of conversations over breakfasts and lunches and afternoon teas, years later, but none of those focused on strictly academic issues or feminist scholarship. I had never considered all the things Ruth-Ellen had done, was doing, and continues to do, to inform my thinking and enable my own work as a feminist and *Germanistin*.

This conversation led me to track down everything Ruth-Ellen has produced over four decades: I discovered over forty articles, thirty book reviews, and twelve books; there are certainly additionally innumerable uncatalogued talks, conference presentations and manuscript reviews.<sup>1</sup> The fascinating aspect of reviewing her scholarly production is to see the evolution of her thought: the first works reflect the parochial interests and constraints of male-dominated *Germanistik*: her MA on Horvath's female characters and her dissertation on Karl Gutzkow's *Wally, die Zweiflerin* explored how male writers viewed and portrayed women. In the 1980s, she did what early *Germanistik* feminist work did: she *recovered* women's voices not in the German canon and published (in chronological order) on Johanna Kinkel; Luise Büchner; Louise Otto; Hedwig Dohm; Marie Luise Kaschnitz; Sophie von La Roche; Louise Dittmar; and Gisela von Arnim. She began embracing interdisciplinarity and was taking broader views by editing or contributing to collections like *Gestaltet und gestaltend: Frauen in der deutschen Literatur* (1980); *German Women in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries: A Social and Literary History* (1983) and *Frauen in der Geschichte: Interdisziplinäre Studien* VI (1985). By the end of the decade, she was exploring the paradox of marginality in the writing of nineteenth-century German women and informing the German-reading audience about new trends in US academic feminism in articles in *Feministische Studien*.

As she became more invested in her feminist work, her comfort with things German was often tinged with skepticism. She opined in numerous articles and editorials over the next decade about

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<sup>1</sup> I make no claim to exhaustiveness in this overview; I invite you to explore the bibliographies at the back of this collection. I would like to thank the specialist librarian Brian Vetruba (University of Minnesota, Wilson Library) for his generous help in compiling the lists of books, articles, and dissertations, and Helga Thorson, for contributing additional items to the list.

*Germanistik* and feminism as the marriage of strange bedfellows, an unlikely, possibly impossible union for both historical and social reasons. Her essays on that topic included “‘Language is Also a Place of Struggle’: The Language of Feminism and the Language of American *Germanistik*”; “Some Thoughts on the Tenuous and Precarious Relationship between Feminism and German Studies”; and “Scattered Thoughts on Current Feminist Literary Critical Work in Nineteenth-Century German Studies.” For a fuller accounting of Ruth-Ellen’s struggles with these concerns, the preface to her lauded book at the end of the decade, *Respectability and Deviance: Nineteenth-Century German Women Writers and the Ambiguity of Representation*,<sup>2</sup> presented a culmination of years of research and inquiry that she situated “somewhere between German and feminist studies,” still suggests, in her own words, her feeling of “ambivalence about what [she] was doing” as a theorist, literary critic, and historian. Within the preface is a fascinating five-page description about her journey to feminism. You will want to read it, because Ruth-Ellen suggests it be read “as the product of a long process of growth . . . , as a journey, but not necessarily an arrival” (xxx).

Perhaps her skepticism and desire to join German studies with feminist thought led her to become the co-editor of the premier feminist journal in our field, the *Women in German Yearbook* (2002–2004); in her editorial with Marjorie Gelus, “Musing Together at Year Twenty,” she revisited many of the themes she outlined in her *Signs* editorials and called for the *Yearbook* to be more interdisciplinary, more international, and more inclusive.

Somehow, I had always imagined R.E. came into the world a fully-formed feminist—perhaps she was in earlier days and simply didn’t have the vocabulary to describe what decades of feminist work later made possible. To my surprise, it was not until 1993 that the word “feminist” regularly appeared in titles of books she co-edited: *Revising the Word and the World: Essays in Feminist Literary Criticism*, and, in the same year, *The Politics of the Essay: Feminist Perspectives*. From that point on, her writings and ruminations focused almost exclusively on feminist scholarship, and here is where her iconoclastic bent (and maybe frustration with the confines of *Germanistik*) becomes most evident: she advocated for inclusionism vs. elitism, plain language vs. jargon and insider language. She puzzled about “the paradox of a

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<sup>2</sup> See Rick McCormick’s article for a description of the numerous awards this book received.

feminist academic journal” (1997), and wondered if editing *Signs* was “elusive theory and illusive practice” (2003)? “Feminism and the Word Wars” (2000) warned that feminism as an academic subject was threatening to become institutionalized in the academy and just as prone to exclusionary forces.

Of course, many more things were written and discussed in the ensuing years and Ruth-Ellen has continued to wrestle with these issues. *The Future of Scholarly Writing: Critical Interventions* (2015) is her most recent co-edited endeavor, bringing together eminent scholars from various disciplines to discuss the premise that *matters of form are matters of content*. This collection is the culmination of her ruminations on the future of scholarship itself. I leave it to you to explore the volume, especially Ruth-Ellen’s “Found in the Details: Essaying the Particular.” In the copy she gifted to me, Ruth-Ellen wrote: “Hurrah for good (i.e., mostly non-academic) writing!” And now, in what is probably a logical consequence, she professes to have abandoned academic prose in favor of constructing a volume of essays. Stay tuned!



FIGURE 11.1

As graduate students and doctoral candidates, we may or may not have known about all these activities, or even appreciated how important Ruth-Ellen was to us and the academy. I certainly saw and knew Ruth-Ellen mostly as our teacher and mentor. She emboldened us to have a voice, whether we were writing about fairy tales or the Holocaust. She nurtured and nudged us along as we struggled with our theses, encouraged our first conference presentations and our first academic articles, and wrote the dreaded letters of recommendation for our various job applications. We were prepared for all of these endeavors because of her teaching.

As I reflect on my own academic training with Ruth-Ellen, I recall (with some vague terror) the first Proseminar on *Junges Deutschland* during my master's program. I picked (or maybe was assigned?) Karl Gutzkow's *Wally, die Zweiflerin* (only later to discover, as my paper was presented, that that book was the subject of Ruth-Ellen's Johns Hopkins PhD). In those proseminars we learned to critique others' work constructively and to produce and discuss literary criticism. For many of us, that was our first foray into true scholarship—and our first encounter with removing *seminal* from our descriptor of the research we read. Those research and critical tools eventually served us well for the dissertations we wrote with her: looking at the titles of the eighteen she advised (starting in 1981 with Dorothea Diver-Stuecher), we all combined the social sciences with literary analysis (even though I never consciously recognized that this was what I was doing). Just as Ruth-Ellen had taught us, we focused on women and challenged the canon. Our titles harkened back to our training: “techniques of ambiguity”; “negotiating borders”; “narration of deviance”; “encounters with the institutions”; “identities in flux”; “appropriation and critique”; “norms vs. narrative”; “women and *Wissenschaft*”; “literary *legerdemain*.” A whole host of graduate students whose lives she touched has gone on to make important contributions, some within the academy and some outside of it. Whatever path we took, Ruth-Ellen encouraged us all to become agents for change.



So, what did I take away from this storytelling at teatime and my subsequent dive into all things Ruth-Ellen? I gained a deeper

understanding of the contributions she made to feminist scholarship and became more aware of her call to action on the part of feminists, academics, and members of the academy. For Ruth-Ellen, revising the word *can* revise the world we all inhabit in the various societies to which we belong. We have her to thank for what we and many others have become. If I could read the tea leaves, Ruth-Ellen's legacy will be our successes in leading feminist lives.

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## Chapter 12

# **A Personal and Intellectual Feminist Journey**



# A Personal and Intellectual Feminist Journey over Four Decades with Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres

## **Sarah Stephens**

Stephens Nicolson Artists Management

**Sarah Stephens** is President and co-founder of Stephens Nicolson Artists Management in New York City, an international agency representing opera singers, conductors, stage directors, and composers world-wide. Born and raised in Minneapolis, she attended the University of Vermont, Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg in Germany, and the University of Minnesota, where she received her master's degree in 2008. In Bremen, Germany, she founded International Artists Management in 1996. Stephens teaches seminars for emerging artists at Middlebury College, The Juilliard School, Cincinnati Conservatory of Music, and Hunter College in New York City. She is on the board of Freiburg Alumni North America and a founding member of Opera Managers Association International (OMAI).



Ruth-Ellen Joeres & Sarah Stephens  
MA Celebration, June 2008

FIGURE 12.1

In the late fall of 1977, after a year abroad in Freiburg, Germany, I reluctantly returned home to Minneapolis to complete my undergraduate degree. My intent was to deepen my knowledge of German and German literature and to head back to Germany as soon as possible.

My year abroad had seemingly changed everything. I lived and breathed as a different person. The way I dressed, the way I ate, my more fashionable hairstyle. I was thinking, seeing, and processing the world very differently than I had before. A new exciting, intriguing world had opened up to me at age twenty in Europe—*ein Blick in die große Welt*—and I didn't want to let go of it for one single moment.

But now, back home, I was thousands of miles away from the world I yearned to be in. A twenty-minute phone call to Germany cost \$100, far beyond my budget, and the thin blue aerogram letters took seven to ten days to cross the Atlantic. It was the pre-internet world of the 1970s, and I felt stranded and isolated—until I registered in the German department at the University of Minnesota.

The first class I signed up for in the winter quarter of 1978 was Goethe's *Faust* with the new young, female professor in the German department, Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres. She was the only female I was aware of in the line-up of mostly older male German professors. In those early days, she taught the traditional Germanic literature canon.

I had no idea how lucky I was. Nor did I anticipate the evolution that was to follow—for her and for me.

I sat in the front row of class and learned volumes from her intellectually curious approach, her contagious enthusiasm for the *Faust* subject matter, and detailed attention to the language, poetry, and imagery. She reminded us from time to time of *Faust*'s far-reaching influence and the value of a work that can be revisited with different eyes throughout a lifetime. How true that came to be.

Indeed, later during graduate studies, thanks to Ruth-Ellen, I learned to re-examine *Faust* with different eyes—namely from a feminist point of view. The contrast between Faust's sweeping struggle for deeper meaning and fulfillment in life and Gretchen's narrowly defined role as the feminine object of his desire and male development became unmistakably clear to me.

Moreover, and perhaps even more eye opening to me, was understanding Goethe's male-vantage-point depiction of Gretchen within the gender stereotype of the *Hure/Jungfrau* dichotomy. As a first-time reader of *Faust*, I gravitated more to his journey and struggle than to Gretchen's. It never occurred to me to ask why. Being aware now of male idealization of female figures, I could no longer ignore those questions of gender stereotypes and vantage points.

In opera, this *Hure/Jungfrau* dichotomy is found in many nineteenth-century works, most notably in Wagner (*Tannhäuser*, *Lohengrin*). The legend of *Faust* was set to music in operas by the composers Hector Berlioz (*Le damnation de Faust*, 1844), Charles Gounod (*Faust*, 1859), Arrigo Boito (*Mefistofele*, 1868), and Ferruccio Busoni (*Doktor Faust*, 1925). These enormously popular works were and still are performed at hundreds of theaters throughout Europe and in the United States (US). The archetypal character portrayal of Gretchen, intricately bound to the legend of *Faust*, has become ingrained in the canon of the operatic repertory. So, Ruth-Ellen was right about the far-reaching influence of *Faust*, but not quite in the way she had taught us in that first class in 1978. Both our world perspectives—*die eigene Weltanschauung*—were fundamentally shifting and changing during those years.

After completion of the *Faust* seminar, I asked Ruth-Ellen if she would be my undergraduate advisor, and she agreed. I had found a new intellectual home as well as someone who understood my struggle as a young, culturally split personality. With her support and mentoring, I sailed through my last year of studies, graduated at the end of the year,

and returned, as planned, to Germany—more knowledgeable and critically aware than before.

In 1981, I again returned to Minnesota, this time to pursue graduate studies in the German Department. Ruth-Ellen had advanced in the department and was teaching new courses in the graduate curriculum that no one had previously offered: “German Woman as Writer” was one of them. I was eager to sign up for most anything she taught, but this seminar was of particular interest to me. The prevailing assumption at that time was that very little nineteenth-century German women’s literature, other than Bettina von Armin, was worthy of much attention. Ruth-Ellen was going out on a limb and not getting support from the department. We were a small, engaged group of students for that early seminar and felt the pull of being witness to the new feminist approach in German literature within academia.

We read Louise Otto, Hedwig Dohm, and others of whom I had never heard before. Most writings were autobiographical in nature: letters, diaries, and self-conscious histories. Ruth-Ellen convinced us of the importance of reading these subjective women’s stories in the context of their marginalized roles in the patriarchal society in which they lived. As secondary texts, we read Elaine Showalter on feminist literary criticism and Adrienne Rich’s *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*. We discussed hidden ideologies, self-censorship, subjectivity of the reader and writer, and writing as a path of self-discovery. I became intrigued by the demystification these women were engaging in and the honesty of their writings. During this seminar, I decided to write my master’s thesis on the letters of Rahel Varnhagen. That never came to be, but it set me on an important life-long path of analyzing writings—and later opera—from a feminist perspective.

At the end of my graduate studies, I was chosen by the department for an exchange at the *Humboldt-Universität* in then-communist East Berlin (GDR). It was another paradigm-shifting experience for me for which I am very grateful. During the previous year, I had gotten married, and my husband had been accepted at Harvard University for a cardiology residency. We both left Minneapolis in the fall of 1984—he for Boston, I for East Berlin, not to return to Minneapolis. By 1991 our family had grown to five, and we settled in Bremen, Germany, to raise our three children for the next nineteen years. Behind me, though, back in Minneapolis, I had left my graduate studies like an open, unfinished book. That followed me around like a shadow for the next twenty-four years.

Fortunately, life circled back around. In 2007, separated from my husband and with my three children launched at various European universities, I decided it was time to finally take on the last chapter of that open book and finish my master's thesis. In Bremen I had founded an international management agency for opera singers that was doing quite well. My divorce was pending, and I wanted to pursue a career in opera management on a higher level. Completing my master's was a critical step for me to become more competitive in the field. Besides, for my own self-esteem, I needed to finally get that degree under my belt. I searched online and found Ruth-Ellen who was in semi-retirement. I sent her an email telling her of my plan. She answered immediately and encouraged me to come back to Minneapolis and do it. So, I did.

By June of 2008 I had completed my master's degree. Ruth-Ellen supported me through the process, helped me re-register and apply for one last credit in the German department, and put together a graduate committee. We met weekly as she coached me through the academic writing process, which I had not engaged in for years and about which I felt insecure. Even more to her credit, she accepted my new thesis title: *The Metaphysics of Wagner's Music in Tristan und Isolde*. She had cautiously told me she was not a fan of Wagner, but she nonetheless listened and mentored me. In the end, she told me she learned a great deal and was more open to it than ever before. I was so pleased. But really, it was testimony to her as a person and to her dedication to her students. I was after all, at age 52, still a student of hers and she was going to see me through.

Following the completion of my master's degree, I moved to New York City and co-founded Stephens Nicolson Artists Management, an international agency for opera. Today, I am part of a small but growing group of women (and men!) who are fighting for more recognition of women composers, conductors, stage directors, and general managers. We are also advocating for more diversity in casting and policy changes in the handling of sexual assault and harassment cases. It's an uphill battle, but the opera world is changing, and I am proud to be part of this long-overdue paradigm shift.

In my work, and in everything I do, I am aware of the need for feminist perspectives. It's been a choice, and it's been an imperative, this feminist path. I am grateful to Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres for mentoring me over the four decades on this journey of feminist choices—and of choosing a feminist life.



## List of Selected Book Publications by Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres

Compiled by Brian Vetruba (Oct. 4, 2019)

Sources: Academic Search Complete, BDSL, MLA International Bibliography, and WorldCat

Bammer, Angelika, and Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres, editors. *The Future of Scholarly Writing: Critical Interventions*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

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## List of Dissertations Supervised by Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres

[arranged chronologically, starting with the most recent]

- Shepela, Anja S. "Meine kühnsten Wünsche und Ideen": Women, Space, Place, and Mobility in Late Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Germany. 2014. U of Minnesota, PhD dissertation.
- Grewling, Nicole. *Fighting the Two-Souled Warrior: German Colonial Fantasies of North America*. 2007. U of Minnesota, PhD dissertation.
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- Stuecher, Dorothea Diver. *Writers in Exile: German Women Writers in America Between 1848 and 1900*. 1981. U of Minnesota, PhD dissertation.



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This book is a Festschrift in honor of Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres, written by several former graduate students, whom she supervised over her years as professor of German Studies at the University of Minnesota, and some of her colleagues and collaborators. The book pays tribute to Joeres's influence on the German Studies profession as well as to her influence on the contributors' lives and the feminist choices they have made. Dr. Joeres is known for her feminist scholarly contributions to women's writing in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, including her book *Respectability and Deviance: Nineteenth-Century German Women Writers and the Ambiguity of Representation* (The U of Chicago Press, 1998), and her collaborative feminist editing practices as editor of both *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* and the *Women in German Yearbook*. Together with Angelika Bammer, she edited a volume *On the Future of Scholarly Writing: Critical Interventions* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2015) that navigates the terrain of academic writing practices and calls for a focus not only on what scholars write but on how they write it. Because of her critical interventions in the realm of academia in general and feminist studies and German studies, in particular, as well as her influence on the lives of the next generations, this book will be of interest beyond those who know her personally.



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