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Introduction: Reading and Writing Berlin

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Abstract

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Keywords

peaceful reunification of Germany, peace, reunification, Germany, Berlin, Bonn, Capital, Capital City, 1989, 1991, German Bundestag, Bundestag, Federal Republic

Introduction: Writing and Reading Berlin

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“Berlin is certainly the capital of unification.”

—Bodo Morshäuser, *Liebeserklärung an eine häßliche Stadt* (137)¹

“He thinks that Berlin will be the capital of the twenty-first century as Paris was the capital of the nineteenth and New York the capital of the twentieth.”

—Ward Just, *The Weather in Berlin* (104)

“The West is a camp for inmates who have been spared. This camp must be defended, against terrorists, against the Third World. I was locked up; freedom is a very important value for me. When I am feeling down, I take a look at the plane trees on Kurfürstendamm, and already I feel better. Berlin is my New York.”

—Imre Kertész in October of 2002 (“Die Glückskatastrophe,” 46)

On June 20, 1991, eight and a half months after the peaceful reunification of Germany, the German Bundestag voted 337 to 320 to move the capital of the Federal Republic from Bonn to Berlin. It was not until eight years later, however, in July of 1999,

that the federal government of Germany actually moved from Bonn to Berlin. In the intervening years a vast number of new construction projects was undertaken in Berlin in order to make space for the government's arrival: the renovation of the *Reichstag* building, the creation of a new federal chancellery, new office space for the members of the Bundestag, new or renovated buildings for all of the federal ministries, new or renovated embassies for foreign governments, and new or renovated buildings for the individual German *Länder*, each of which is represented in Berlin politically and architecturally. As Andreas Huyssen put it, Berlin during the 1990s was "a text frantically being written and rewritten," and many of those writing it sought "nothing less than to create the capital of the twenty-first century" (Huyssen, "Voids," 57, 60).

In addition to the vast amount of construction for the federal and *Länder* governments and for foreign embassies, Berlin witnessed a remarkable boom in private construction throughout the 1990s as entire swaths of land in and around the center of the city were developed, especially in those areas made available by the disappearance of the Wall, in what Huyssen called "the voids of Berlin." Most notable among these developments was the Potsdamer Platz, once Europe's busiest intersection and now again a bustling commercial center not far from the *Reichstag* building. Before the opening of the Wall, however, it was an empty patch of no-man's land on the border between East and West Berlin, made cinematographically memorable in the mournful images of Wim Wenders' film *Der Himmel über Berlin* (Wings of Desire, 1986). New museums were also created in Berlin during the 1990s: in particular, the *Gemäldegalerie*, which houses one of Germany's greatest collections of paintings by old masters and is located not far from Potsdamer Platz; and the Jewish Museum, located in Kreuzberg not far from what used to be the American military Checkpoint Charlie and what is now, once again, simply the intersection of Friedrichstraße and Zimmerstraße—even if it is home to a museum still named after the defunct checkpoint.

Partly as a result of all this construction activity, Berlin was celebrated for much of the 1990s as the West's greatest construction site.

tion site. Christo and Jeanne-Claude's popular *Wrapped Reichstag* project of 1995 seemed to symbolize the new possibilities, as if Berlin were the site for the reconstruction of a new, and better, German identity, or as if, after years of division and occupation by foreign troops, the city were being given back to Germans as a kind of present, wrapped in a magical fabric: here, the project seemed to say, is the new center of a new city, and it offers the chance to create a new national identity; make with it what you will. But in the midst of all this newness, even the most awful aspects of the German past were not to be forgotten: in the center of the new city, between the *Reichstag* building and Potsdamer Platz, was to be the Holocaust Memorial with its row upon row of symbolic gravestones (see Cullen and Haardt). As Bodo Morshäuser declared in the mid-1990s, "there has never been . . . such a drive to remember, such a drive to [Freudian] projection" (Morshäuser 137) as in Berlin now. For a character in Uwe Timm's novel *Rot* (Red, 2001) the "drive to remember" takes a terrorist form. For him the focal point of German history is located slightly further to the west: at the *Siegessäule* (Victory Column) in the great city park called the *Tiergarten*. "Here you have the catastrophies of German history gathered together iconographically: the wars, the founding of the Reich, the world wars, revolution, the Weimar Republic, the Nazi period . . ." (Timm 306-307; for a critique of Timm, see Peter Fritzsche's essay in this volume). Whereas Timm's fictional character, a disappointed and compulsive former member of the left-wing movements of the 1960s and 1970s, wishes to destroy the Victory Column as a celebration of war and violence, the very real plans for the Holocaust Memorial suggested that the German state was far from any unproblematic celebration of conventional national identity. Berlin may have been the crucible of a new German identity, but that new identity, the planned memorial seemed to say, was predicated upon remembering, not forgetting, the past. Perhaps paradoxically, Timm's failed terrorist and the real-existing German state had the same goal: to remind Germans of the problematic nature of their own national identity.

With all the highly visible, physical construction activity taking place in Berlin during the decade after reunification, one might reasonably ask what was the role of literature and of literary intellectuals in creating the new Berlin, not just as a physical space but also as a cultural concept. Did they indeed have a role to play, or were they just supernumeraries in a drama that was being dominated primarily by politicians, city planners, and architects? Since this issue of *Studies in Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Literature* is devoted to the metropolitan literature of the new Berlin and the new Germany, it can be reasonably assumed that most of its authors agree in seeing literary intellectuals as playing a role in the imaginative construction of Germany's capital city. That is the position that I, as editor, also take (for an attempt on my part to explore the competition between literature and the visual in creating the new city, see Brockmann, "The Written Capital"). There are a number of reasons to believe that writers and other literary intellectuals have played a significant role in shaping the new Berlin as a symbolic space: 1) literary intellectuals played a major role in the public debates surrounding the collapse of the German Democratic Republic and the reunification of Germany in 1989 and 1990; 2) the very intensity of Berlin's physical and architectural transformation tended to reinforce the sense of a city whose physical structure, including especially its buildings, was, perhaps paradoxically, more malleable than public and private memories and images of those structures, including memories and images created by literature and literary intellectuals; 3) discussions of German "normality" throughout the 1990s and into the present century have tended to make Berlin, as Germany's political and literary capital, a primary object of debate, and literary intellectuals have been the major protagonists in these discussions; and 4) international developments, and particularly the movement referred to as "globalization," have renewed interest among literary intellectuals in metropolitan centers as both staging areas for global elites and focal points for the resistance of the local and specific to perceived tendencies of homogenization. In what follows I will elaborate on each of these points before giving a brief summary of

Berlin literature of the 1990s, and of critical discussions about Berlin literature.

Literary Intellectuals and Reunification

Literary intellectuals had undoubtedly played a major role in the drama of German reunification itself. In the months and days leading up to the opening of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989, East German writers had been among the most prominent dissident voices calling for an end to the political dictatorship of the SED (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, the name of the Communist Party of East Germany). The writers Christoph Hein, Stefan Heym, and Christa Wolf had all given speeches at the mass demonstration on East Berlin's Alexanderplatz five days prior to November 9, 1989, the day the Wall was opened, invoking the dream of a better socialism, a socialism from which, in Wolf's words, no one would run away (James and Stone 129). Many prominent East German writers, including Heym and Wolf, were among the signatories of the anti-unification declaration "For Our Country" in December of 1989 (Wolf, *Reden*, 170-171; Wolf, "The G.D.R. Forever"). Germany's most famous writer, the novelist Günter Grass, who was to win the Nobel Prize for Literature a decade later, was also the most prominent German critic of reunification, insisting that German division was an appropriate response to the horrors of Auschwitz, and urging a looser confederation of the two German states rather than full political unity. Writers and literary intellectuals were also each other's most prominent and persistent critics: Monika Maron wrote a blistering attack on what she saw as East German writers' literary opposition to reunification, while the critics of Christa Wolf and her novella *Was bleibt* (*What Remains*), published in 1990, created one of the biggest literary-political debates of unification itself (Maron, "Writers and the People"). Indeed, it is symptomatic of the political importance of literary intellectuals in Germany that the East German public figure most hotly debated in 1990 was not the ailing former leader of the GDR, Erich Honecker, or his successor Egon Krenz, but rather the writer Christa Wolf (on these debates, see Brockmann, *Literature and German Reunification*).

Even at a time when many GDR writers were perceived by critics like Maron to be out of touch with the majority of the GDR population and to have therefore lost their relevance in public debate, they continued, paradoxically, to be one of the major foci of attention, and their most prominent critics were, of course, writers themselves.

In the years following the collapse of the GDR in 1989 and German reunification in 1990, writers and other literary intellectuals have continued to play a major role in debates of national and international significance in Germany, from the discussions surrounding the Stasi or East German secret police to debates about the politics of literature, coming to terms with the German past, German involvement in international military actions abroad, the wars and civil wars in the Balkan region, and the German response to the terrorist attacks on the United States that occurred on September 11, 2001 (on some of these debates, see Rosellini). In all of these, and many other, debates, it has been clear that writers and other literary intellectuals in Germany have continued, after reunification, to play an unusually significant role in German public and political discourse, a role far different from that played by literary intellectuals in most other Western nations. There are a number of reasons why writers play such an important role in these public debates in Germany. Most significantly, writers' political prominence springs from their traditional status, since the beginning of the nineteenth century, as propounders of the German *Kulturnation* (idealistic cultural nation), and from the highly critical political stance taken by German writers to the German *Staatsnation* (actually existing political nation) in the wake of World War II and the Holocaust. In addition, since Germany has fewer prominent public intellectuals of the sort referred to somewhat disparagingly as "policy wonks" in the United States, and fewer newspaper columnists who publish regular essays on matters of political opinion, writers in Germany have tended to take on some of the role played by such people. This was particularly true in the German Democratic Republic, where, because of censorship and government control of the press, writers had to play a more prominent role in the alternative public sphere in which freer

speech was possible (see Bathrick). It is also, albeit to a lesser extent, true of the Federal Republic. Finally, there can be little doubt that for many German writers participation in these debates is also at least partly a conscious or unconscious marketing strategy, helping to keep writers and their works in the public eye. The advent of new technologies and new media, far from rendering representatives of German literary culture obsolete, has enabled them in many instances to expand their presence, quite literally, to new domains.

The Impermanence of the Physical City and the Permanence of the Word

In his 1982 novella *Der Mauerspringer* (The Wall Jumper), Peter Schneider had written, “All in all, I’m one of the more durable things here” (Schneider, *Wall Jumper*, 139). This sentence gives voice to a realization about Berlin and its history that has been reinforced by the physical changes in Berlin’s landscape of the 1990s and 2000s. It is literally true that Berlin’s oldest residents have already experienced not only a large number of political systems and states—from the *Kaiserreich* through the Weimar Republic and Hitler’s “Third Reich” to the divided Germany of the postwar period and ultimately the reunited Germany of today—but also a large number of buildings, streets, monuments, and other urban structures and infrastructure associated with those states. As Huyssen has noted, “there is perhaps no other major Western city that bears the marks of twentieth-century history as intensely and self-consciously as Berlin” (Huyssen, “Voids,” 59). Hitler’s “Thousand-Year Reich” lasted only a little over twelve years, and its destruction coincided with the physical destruction of large portions of the physical city, which Hitler had wanted to transform into a megalomaniacal and permanent “Germania.”

Although American tourists like to think of European cities as full of old architecture which bears witness to centuries of cultural tradition and permanence, Berlin tells a very different story to its visitors and residents: that of the impermanence of physical constructions and the relative permanence of linguistic and literary ones. To take just two examples, Alfred Döblin’s novel

Berlin Alexanderplatz (1929), the most famous Berlin novel, has long outlasted the specific urban space after which it was named—the space now called “Alexanderplatz” is far different from the one in the novel’s title—and Schneider’s *Der Mauerspringer*, created at the beginning of the 1980s, has by now existed for more than a decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall that it continues, on paper and in the minds of its readers, to describe. Berlin is an object lesson not just in the social construction of reality, but also, and perhaps more importantly, in the social deconstruction of reality. Americans were reminded of the impermanence of even the most imposing architectural structures on September 11, 2001. Don DeLillo’s novel *Underworld* (1997), which, among other things, documents the construction of the World Trade Center, can now remind them of the kind of afterlife created in literature.² It was perhaps not entirely a coincidence that in the aftermath of the terrorist attack on New York City Germans engaged in a major discussion about the air war and their own experience of World War II (see Friedrich). For Germans the attack on New York City was a traumatic reminder of their own horrific history, and of the speed with which physical structures and entire cities can disappear.³ It is in books and movies, in paintings and photographs, and in the memories of its inhabitants and visitors, that the many past Berlins continue to survive in and around the present, ever-changing Berlin.

“Now let us, by a flight of imagination, suppose that Rome is not a human habitation but a psychical entity with a similarly long and copious past,” writes Freud in *Civilization and its Discontents*. This psychic city, Freud declares, would be “an entity . . . in which nothing that has once come into existence will have passed away and all the earlier phases of development continue to exist alongside the latest one,” with the result that “where the Coliseum now stands we could at the same time admire Nero’s vanished Golden House” (Freud 18). The point of Freud’s thought experiment is the persistence of memory and the impermanence of the physical. Contemporary Berlin would perhaps be an equally dramatic illustration of Freud’s point. If Berlin were a psychic

Communist *Palast der Republik* existing in the same space, crowded in with all the other built and unbuilt, planned and unplanned, imagined and unforeseen changes to the city throughout the centuries. Architecture and city planning, as the physical ordering of space and material in real, present time, can, by their very nature, never achieve the historical depth of Freud's "psychical entity" or of the remembered city invoked, and fixed, in literature. In both architecture and city planning one choice excludes the other: hence the bitter debates in contemporary Berlin between the neo-traditionalist supporters of "critical reconstruction" on the one hand and the neo-avant-gardist proponents of corporate postmodernism on the other (see Huyssen, "Voids," Goebel, and Stewart). Literature allows all options to be realized, and to become relatively permanent; it is a way not of settling debates but of keeping them open. Huyssen refers to Berlin as a palimpsest (Huyssen, "After the War"), and this is of course a way of comparing the physical city to writing; it is a way of saying that the city's architecture can in some way come to have the memory-preserving qualities of writing generally and literature more specifically. But a palimpsest is an imperfect device for memory, since it requires the erasure of what was previously written, and in this sense it is a good metaphor for architecture and city planning. In the final analysis the writing archived in books, journals, microfilm, and computer memory banks preserves the city's history far better than a palimpsest, because no new piece of writing must necessarily deface or destroy another, older piece. At the end of Norman Ohler's novel *Mitte* (2001), a novel about Berlin's haunted nature, the permanence of writing is made clear when the building occupied by the novel's protagonist, a decrepit remnant of the city's past, comes tumbling down on the anniversary of the Berlin Wall's demise, leaving the protagonist himself, as well as the novel's readers, unscathed. Even the wispy slips of paper left blowing in the air draughts of this haunted building's attic by a fictitious Japanese writer of the nineteenth century seem to have more permanence than many of Berlin's physical buildings; they may be "pale traces of signs, faded by darkness and time" (Ohler 69), and they may threaten to dissolve under the

protagonist's scrutiny, but in the end they last at least as long as the building itself. And the protagonist's—and reader's—memory of them will last even longer. Americans can be reminded of the massive torrent of office paper falling from the skies of New York on September 11, 2001 and that paper's ability to outlive the destruction of the World Trade Center: "Sheets of paper driven into concrete, according to witnesses. Paper slicing into truck tires, fixed there." (DeLillo, "In the Ruins of the Future," 35; see also Abel 1243)

German Normality and the Normal Capital

One of the historical legacies of Germany as a "belated nation" is what is called in German "Kleinstaaterei," a divided existence in multiple states and principalities that characterized the history of the Holy Roman Empire and its successor, the German Confederation created in 1815 (on Germany as a "belated nation," see the classic study by Plessner). Because of Germany's failure to unite as a nation-state until the second half of the nineteenth century, Germany also failed to create a capital city. Just as each of German's many government entities existed in a state of rivalry with all the others, so too all the German cities vied with each other for attention and respect. It was not until after Bismarck's unification of Germany in 1871 that Berlin began to achieve the status of preeminent German capital.

The subsequent rapid physical and cultural growth of Berlin, however, was accompanied by a strong negative reaction against that growth: "Los von Berlin!" ("Away from Berlin!") became the rallying cry of cultural conservatives for whom the purportedly wholesome provinces and the supposedly good earth of the nation's peasants and landowners stood in stark contrast to an infamously degenerate, depraved, and deracinated metropolis. With Berlin's devastation in the bombing raids of World War Two and the subsequent half-century of urban and national division, the city's harshest critics seemed to have gotten their way. The capital of the Federal Republic was Bonn, not Berlin: a sleepy provincial town sometimes referred to mockingly as the *Bundeshaupstodt* (capital village of the federation). John le

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Carré called Bonn a “small town in Germany,” describing it as “an island cut off by fog” and a “very *metaphysical* spot” where “dreams have quite replaced reality” (Le Carré 41). Bonn’s small-town status seemed to rub off on the Federal Republic itself, endowing all of West Germany with a provincial and provisional quality. In his novel *Meine nachtblaue Hose* (My Navy-Blue Pants, 2000), David Wagner describes childhood in the West German capital—“coming of age in trizonesia”—as an antiseptic and boring “shrink-wrapped West German life” (Wagner 158, 157), a life from which his protagonist has now mercifully escaped—to Berlin, of course.

While Berlin during the cold war may have maintained its status as the “Hauptstadt der DDR” (capital of the GDR) in the language of East German officialdom, this capital status hardly compared to the city’s previous stints as German capital, since East Berlin—in contrast to Bonn as the capital of the West German “trizonesia” or three zones of occupation—was a third of a city serving as capital for a third of a nation in just one occupation zone, the Soviet zone. And if the French writer François Mauriac had declared himself so enamored of France’s neighbor to the east that he was delighted there were two Germanys, then Berlin’s friends/enemies could declare themselves similarly pleased with what Peter Schneider called the city’s “Siamese” existence (Schneider, *Wall Jumper*, 5).

Invocations of hostility toward or fear of Berlin recall an important aspect of the reunification debates, which revolved around the problem of provincialism versus cosmopolitanism. In the criticism of Karl Heinz Bohrer and Frank Schirrmacher, two influential literary intellectuals and critics, pre-1989 West Germany was characterized by its provincialism and lack of metropolitan flare. German authors, according to Schirrmacher in October of 1989, a month before the opening of the Wall, “live in cities or at the very least they know them. But for decades we have had no city literature, no literature of urban life, of the world metropolis. There are ‘New York Stories’ in the cinema, but there is no postwar Berlin. Every year it’s announced, but since *Berlin Alexanderplatz* it hasn’t happened” (Schirrmacher cited in Steinert

234). This judgment was hardly accurate even at the time, since the 1980s had witnessed both Bodo Morshäuser's *Berliner Simulation* (*Berlin Simulation*) and Schneider's *Der Mauerspringer*, among others, as well as Wenders' aforementioned film and a renewed critical interest in metropolitan literature and film in Germany. Nevertheless the criticism of provincialism was an important part of cultural critique of the "old" Federal Republic, and it became a major part of cultural critique of the reunified Germany as well. Throughout the 1980s, Bohrer had decried what he saw as West German provincialism, arguing that unlike France, with Paris, and England, with London, Germany lacked a political and intellectual center. Bohrer had claimed that the resulting provincialism had an adverse effect on German cultural life (Bohrer, *Nach der Natur*). He renewed his critique of provincialism in the wake of reunification, arguing for a new cosmopolitan self-confidence on the part of the unified nation. "When West Germany came to have five, six, or seven 'metropolises,' one richer than the other, in reality everything became provincial," he wrote (Bohrer, "Provinzialismus," 1097). For Bohrer the unhappy German *Sonderweg* (special historical path) had been caused above all by the devastating lack of the unity and style guaranteed by a powerful, self-confident metropolitan center. Bohrer hoped that the once and future capital, Berlin, would help solve this problem.

The closeness of the Bundestag's 1991 vote to move the German capital from Bonn to Berlin certainly suggests that Bohrer was not entirely wrong in diagnosing a certain German provincialism and fear of cosmopolitanism. Indeed, given the fact that Bonn had always officially been seen by West German politicians as a provisional German capital, and that Berlin had always been invoked as the permanent German capital, the large number of Bundestag delegates who ultimately voted for Bonn and against Berlin is astounding and instructive of ongoing German distrust of the great metropolis (on the debate about the capital, see Richie 850-858 and Large 545-552). Nevertheless, by however narrow a margin the Bundestag did ultimately choose Berlin, and over the course of the 1990s cultural critics and pundits of all sorts began

to talk about a “Berlin Republic” and a “Berlin Generation,” all of which were taken to be part of a process of “normalization” in which German politics, history, and yes, literature, were coming to resemble more closely other western models (see Bude, Habermas, and Schacht/Schwilk). Berlin would play the role of New York, Paris, and London as the metropolitan center of the nation; the “Berlin Generation” was more interested in fun and games than in weighty matters of moral judgment; the new Germany would closely resemble its western neighbors; and German literature would come to look much like other western literatures, favoring elegant literary entertainments over ponderous moralism.

The Urban as Meeting Point of the Global and the Local

German reunification coincided with increasing debates among scholars and theorists about the process labeled “globalization,” a process already identified and described in 1848 by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in the *Communist Manifesto* but undergoing acceleration in the 1990s. This process was characterized by the increasing mobility around the world of capital and goods, as well as of human beings, both elites and the underprivileged. In this context many intellectuals questioned the significance of the nation-state, suggesting that with the passage of time national governments were losing power in the face of global economic, ecological, and political trends. Great metropolises like New York, London, and Tokyo represented not so much the synthesis as the meeting point of opposites in the process of globalization. On the one hand such cities were very much part of the process itself. They housed the major airports and other transportation facilities, and they were the focal points for global elites. It was in cities that the financial markets, the banks, and the major corporations had their headquarters. But it was also for the most part to the cities that the world’s refugees and poor came. Here the poor and the rich lived in closer proximity to each other than in the countryside or in the suburbs. For all these reasons cities offered the ideal space for writers and other literary intellectuals to study the process of globalization.

However in spite of the increasing homogenization or even “Americanization” of culture around the world, cities were also unmistakably local. The elites circulating between London and New York may have remained more or less the same, but London remained unmistakably London and New York remained unmistakably New York. And, moreover, Berlin remained stubbornly Berlin, in spite of all efforts to transform it into New York or London. The specifically local milieu of Berlin is celebrated in many recent Berlin novels, from the Kreuzberg of Sven Regener’s *Herr Lehmann* (2001) or Ulrich Peltzer’s *Alle oder keiner* (Everyone or No One, 1999) to the East Berlin of Thomas Brussig’s *Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee* (On the Short End of Sun Avenue, also 1999) or the old central core of Ohler’s *Mitte*. In these novels the stubbornness of the local is far from unproblematic, but it forms a counterpoint to the stubbornness and homogenization of the global.

The Serb attacks on the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo in the 1990s and the Islamist terrorist attack on New York City in September of 2001 reinforced intellectuals’ understanding that cities were not just virtual meeting spaces, like the World Wide Web, or even “psychical” entities of the sort described by Freud but also all-too-vulnerable “brick-and-mortar” social constructions that represent one of the great achievements of human civilization. If the city of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had frequently been seen as an all-powerful, threatening “Moloch”—as in Fritz Lang’s classic silent film *Metropolis* (1926/1927)—at the beginning of the twenty-first century the city seems far more fragile and contingent, evoking the kind of love and protectiveness expressed by the Hungarian Nobel Prizewinner Imre Kertész, who keeps an apartment in Berlin, in October of 2002.

If Frank Schirrmacher had argued in 1989 that there was no such thing as German metropolitan literature, then by the end of the 1990s it had become clear to scholars and other critics that there was indeed a plentiful metropolitan literature, with literally hundreds of titles dealing with the city of Berlin (for a partial bibliog-

raphy of this literature, see Jaszynski). Wolf's *Was bleibt* had still given a largely negative, pessimistic view of the city as "everything that people do to one another, both good and bad" (Wolf, "What Remains," 277) while Grass's ambitious and controversial *Ein weites Feld* (Too Far Afield, 1995), very much a Berlin novel, contained both positive and negative images of the city. Many of the Berlin novels published over the course of the 1990s, such as Thomas Hettche's *Nox* (1995) and Tim Staffel's *Terrordrom* (1998), still bore traces of such negative views of the city. Indeed, since the city has been and still is usually the setting for most detective and crime novels, it is inevitable that literary portrayals of the city as a place full of crime, terror, and perversion, will continue, as in Georg Klein's clever *Barbar Rosa* (2001), a detective novel set in the troubled capital of a troubled German nation at an indeterminate time in the future. Katrin Sieg's essay in this volume about the innovative detective novels of Pieke Biermann is another case in point. However as Sieg demonstrates, Biermann's Berlin also contains utopian social and sexual elements. For Biermann Berlin is not just the site of crime and horror but also a space in which sexual and economic minorities can come together in solidarity and companionship. By the beginning of the twenty-first century it was clear that many writers had come to accept and even to celebrate the city as *Heimat*, in spite of all criticism. "From beginning to end it was something to barf about, but we enjoyed ourselves tremendously," declares the narrator of Brussig's *Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee* (Brussig 153). Regener's eponymous Herr Lehmann, speaking of the West Berlin of the 1980s, might say the same thing. Much of contemporary Berlin literature presents the city not as an exotic milieu to be amazed at or terrified of, but as home. In Bodo Morshäuser's novel *In seinen Armen das Kind* (In His Arms the Child, 2002) it is not the city of Berlin that is home to perversion and cruelty; rather, it is the supposedly pristine German countryside invoked by the psychosexual and political revolutionaries of the 1970s and 1980s that is the true home of terror and fear. Morshäuser celebrated the city precisely for its chaotic lack of aesthetic unity in his essays *Liebeserklärung an eine häßliche Stadt* (Love Letter to

an Ugly City, 1998). For Morshäuser Berlin was “the only true [German] city, because it isn’t silent about anything” (Morshäuser 138). Moreover, he believed, Berlin had always been “the capital of narration” (Morshäuser 138). The American writer Ward Just, who spent three months at the American Academy in Berlin in the winter of 1999, seemed to agree when he allowed the main character of his novel *The Weather in Berlin* (2002) to invoke Berlin as “a narrator’s utopia, the story of the world, ruin and re-birth,” a story that “belonged to whoever could tell it best.” (Just 304).

German writers are well aware of the critical expectations placed on them to produce great metropolitan literature. Matthias Zschokke, a writer born in Switzerland who has been living in Berlin for more than a decade, published his satire *Der dicke Dichter* (The Fat Writer) in 1995, about a writer suffering from writer’s block and desperately trying but failing to create the new city novel. In the ruminations of his protagonist, Zschokke makes fun of more general literary-critical expectations for the new Berlin novel:

It will only take a few weeks, I promise you, maybe just days or even a few more hours until the knot inside me comes untied and the new big-city novel pours out of me in glowing prose. I can sense it, believe me: the city is eyeing me, full of coquettish self-confidence, as if she were just waiting for someone to finally write her down. It’s nothing less than the talk of the town that Berlin has to be, wants to be, and will be written anew, and the pencils have been sharpened, there is nothing but shuffling and scraping when one walks through the streets, everywhere the sharpened pencils are crowding into the starting gates, no question about it, and believe me, I will get it under control, force it to its knees, this . . . this . . . this mare Babylon. . . . (Zschokke 127-28)

Joachim Lottmann, one of the creators of the new German “pop literature” of the 1990s—whose center was, of course, Berlin—also parodied expectations of the great Berlin novel in a work that bore the tongue-in-cheek title *Deutsche Einheit* (German Unity, 1999). In this novel the first-person narrator is urged

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“Write it down, young man, your Berlin novel! Get to it! I’m looking forward to it.”

I was floating on Cloud Nine. On the very next day, I decided, I would begin my great novel about Berlin!

German unity, the great Berlin novel . . . strange that I didn’t know any Ossis. (Lottmann 167)

Such expressions of irony demonstrate both the pressure that authors feel to create city literature that will sum up the essence of German reunification—of the historic encounter between East Germans and West Germans that was taking place at close quarters in the formerly divided city, Germany’s new and old capital—as well as authors’ discomfort with that pressure. However a novel like Peltzer’s *Alle oder keiner* demonstrates, as Christian Jäger argues in his essay in this volume, that not all authors are as unequal to the task as Zschokke’s and Lottmann’s fictional scribes.

Scholarly interest in Berlin literary discourse has continued to grow over the course of the last decade. As Huyssen points out, “the trope of the city as book or text has existed as long as we have had a modern city literature” (Huyssen, “Voids,” 58). Literary scholars have maintained and even increased their interest in this trope even as architects and urban planners have begun to move away from semiotic interpretations of the city. After all, whether or not cities themselves are texts, books about them certainly are. Erhard Schütz, whose thematic exploration of twentieth-century Berlin literature opens this volume, coedited a major anthology of essays on contemporary Berlin literature in 1999. As Jörg Magenau writes in that collection, German literature “has long since declared the metropolis on the Spree its capital city” (Magenau 59). In the English-speaking world Barbara Becker-Cantarino edited a scholarly anthology of essays on Berlin and Berlin literature in the United States in 1996. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the editorial work of Thomas Steinfeld and Heidrun Suhr in German, and of Charles Werner Haxthausen and Heidrun Suhr in English, helped to renew scholarly interest in the city and its texts. In 2004 Carol Anne Costabile-Heming, whose essay on Friedrich Christian Delius’s novel *Die*

Flatterzunge (The Flutter-Tongue, 1999) is included in this volume, was scheduled to edit another critical anthology on Berlin literature together with the scholars Rachel J. Halverson and Kristie A. Foell. Whereas writers in Germany tend to view Berlin in its differentiation from the rest of Germany, scholars elsewhere, including the United States, tend to see Berlin as representative of Germany as a whole. Both perspectives are useful and necessary.

The essays in this volume concentrate primarily on the literature of the 1990s; only the first two essays, by Erhard Schütz and Sabine Hake, focus on the literature of Berlin's "classical modernity" (Peukert), the period of the Weimar Republic. Since contemporary imaginations of Berlin are cinematic as well as literary, and since, as Erhard Schütz and Ulrike Zitzlsperger demonstrate in their essays, Berlin cinema and Berlin literature tend to reinforce and complement each other, the volume closes with an essay by Barbara Mennel on a much-discussed recent Berlin film, *Lola und Bilidikid* (1999). Film is, after all, not just a visual medium; screenplays are always initially a literary medium. In imagining the German metropolis, literature and film work together to construct a written capital that shadows, and will probably outlast, the city of steel, brick, and stone.

Notes

- 1 Unless noted otherwise, translations from German are my own.
- 2 "The World Trade Center was under construction, already towering, twin-towering, with cranes tilted at the summits and work elevators sliding up the flanks." (DeLillo, *Underworld*, 372) See also DeLillo's response to the towers' collapse, "In the Ruins of the Future."
- 3 According to the late writer W. G. Sebald, Germans had repressed the memory of the destruction of their cities in the air raids of World War II. See Sebald, *Luftkrieg und Literatur*; English version: "Air War and Literature."

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