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## Introduction

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**ARTICLE – RETHINKING MINOR LITERATURES**

# Introduction: Rethinking “Minor Literatures” – Contemporary Jewish Women’s Writing in Germany and Austria

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This introduction sets out the aim of the special collection which is to unmoor German-language Jewish writing from the narrowly defined context of national literatures in which it is often discussed, in an attempt to open it up to discussions around transnational and world literatures. Simultaneously, it suggests that Deleuze’s and Guattari’s framework can benefit immensely from being (re-)applied to its ‘original’, i.e. the Jewish, context, not least by investigating the ways in which it maybe no longer adequately reflects more contemporary concerns. As for the study of the authors and texts that this collection focuses on, the introduction highlights a number of issues which have the potential to innovate discussions around “minor” literatures, German Jewish literatures and the relationship between literature and theory.

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The aim of this special collection is to probe the productivity of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s much-debated notion of “minor literature” in the context of contemporary Jewish writing in the German-language literary landscape. Deleuze and Guattari famously argued that being and writing “minor” does not necessarily result from belonging to a numerically small linguistic and/or literary community, but from an author’s relationship with and use of majority traditions: “A minor literature doesn’t come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language” (Deleuze and Guattari 24). Moreover, Deleuze and Guattari conceptualise “minor” literature not only as an aesthetico-philosophical category, but also as an eminently political phenomenon with revolutionary potential. Due to its fundamentally communal character, “minor” literature is able to express “another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility” (Deleuze and Guattari 26).<sup>1</sup>

With Kafka being their major case study, one could argue that Deleuze and Guattari’s concept was, from the onset, developed in dialogue with Jewish writing. It has since been applied to a range of other manifestations of so-called minority writing, both within and outside

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that, throughout this collection, we work with the English translation of Deleuze and Guattari’s study which has been produced by Dana Polan. We are aware that this translation is by no means perfect, and that already the translation of their notion of “mineur” as “minor” raises issues. For the sake of greater reach and readability, though, we have decided against working with the French original.

of the German-language setting (for example Adelson; Chin; Littler; Morris; Sarnou; Yildiz). There seems to be little exploration, however, of whether their ideas are (still) useful when examining the landscape of *contemporary* Jewish writing, which is undergoing significant changes, partially due to a growing number of female-authored contributions (see also Garloff and Mueller). The popularity of writers such as Alina Bronsky, Mirna Funk, Lena Gorelik, Olga Grjasnowa, Kat Kaufmann, Katja Petrowskaja, Nele Pollatschek, Julya Rabinowich and Sasha Marianna Salzmann has broadened and challenged what can still be considered a male-centred canon of Jewish writing, not least because their works raise genuinely new issues: the majority of these authors come from a migrant – in many cases Eastern European – background and therefore straddle and negotiate not only various cultural but also different linguistic heritages and backgrounds, which makes their writing decidedly transnational and transcultural. They tend to question fixed binaries and boundaries, often in terms of national and linguistic belonging but also in relation to gender. Many of their texts revolve around similar themes, such as belonging, identity, memory and trauma, but some of these often very young authors clearly and self-confidently defy expectations. These writers' sense of Jewishness and their encounter with German "mainstream" society are shaped less and less by memories of the Holocaust and the negative German-Jewish symbiosis, but encompass a "multidirectional" (Rothberg) melange of various other experiences and histories of anti-Semitism, totalitarianism, war and violence.

Leslie Morris has recently shown how Deleuze and Guattari's thought can provide a helpful springboard, enabling a much-needed reassessment and redefinition of German-Jewish writing which acknowledges its fundamentally "transnational, multilingual, hybrid" (Morris 7) character. This special collection continues on this path by further probing the extent to which the framework of a "minor" literature is appropriate and helpful when studying recent writings by German-language Jewish women authors. The various contributions to this collection examine four important contemporary female Jewish writers (Barbara Honigmann, Eva Menasse, Katja Petrowskaja and Sasha Marianna Salzmann) who come from different cultural, generational and linguistic backgrounds, but all centre on questions of Jewish identity and writing in their respective oeuvres. We chose these four authors in particular because they represent a rich mix of emergent and more established writers, of various forms of Jewish mobility, of native and non-native uses of the German language, and of German, Austrian and Eastern European cultural backgrounds, thus tapping into many of the trends that are currently reshaping German-language Jewish writing. By bringing these writers together with Deleuze and Guattari's theory, and by focusing on literary strategies of expressing "being minor" more generally, this collection foregrounds a range of new issues that have not received a lot of attention in German-Jewish scholarship, which still tends to be dominated by questions of Holocaust memory and the transgenerational transmission of traumatic experiences. Beyond explorations of particular authors and their texts, the contributions gathered here also provide suggestions as to how Deleuze and Guattari's general framework can be productively modified when explored through the lens of a particular literature, in this case contemporary Jewish women's writing in Germany and Austria. The stress on writers who juggle a multiplicity of cultural, ethnic, national, linguistic and gendered attachments brings different concerns to the fore, which were not the main focus of Deleuze and Guattari's thinking. These include questions of intersectionality, gender and labelling, but also debates on transculturalism, migration and futurity. The collection thus seeks to unmoor German-language Jewish writing from the narrowly defined context of national literatures in which it is often discussed, in an attempt to open it up to considerations around transnational and world literatures. Simultaneously, it suggests that Deleuze and Guattari's framework can benefit immensely from being (re-)applied to its "original" – that is, the Jewish – context, not

least by investigating the ways in which it perhaps no longer adequately reflects contemporary concerns.

As for the study of the authors and texts that this collection focuses on, the contributions collected here bring to light a number of issues which have the potential to innovate discussions around “minor” literatures, German Jewish literatures and the relationship between literature and theory.

*Intersectionality and Post-Holocaust Identities:* The articles gathered here demonstrate that present-day Jewish identities need to be approached from an intersectional angle. All of the authors centrally considered in this collection – Barbara Honigmann, Eva Menasse, Katja Petrowskaja and Sasha Marianna Salzmann – discuss their Jewishness in relation to various other factors, such as age and generational identity, gender and sexuality, the ethnicisation and commodification of identities, migration as well as cultural and linguistic (dis-)locatedness. They also reflect, explicitly and implicitly, on their roles as “minority” or “ethnic” writers in the German literary scene, often playing with expectations, labels and stereotypes. What this means above all is that the prevalent focus on the Holocaust and the “negative Symbiose” [negative symbiosis] (Diner) no longer captures the increasing diversification of Jewish identities in Germany and Austria today. The authors discussed here negotiate their Jewish identities from a “multidirectional” (Rothberg) viewpoint that is in dialogue with various non-German and/or non-Jewish memories, histories and experiences. This also implies that they are no longer simply and exclusively “Jewish” writers, but that their self-understanding is constantly shifting and relational, depending on a multiplicity of contexts. As scholars, we thus need to question whether the label of “Jewish” writing, as it is currently used, is potentially essentialising and reductive – as has been suggested, for example, by Dan Miron and, more recently, Leslie Morris.

*Transnationalism, Transculturalism and Translingualism:* What also becomes clear is that the labels of German- and Austrian-Jewish writing increasingly transcend the boundaries of the German and Austrian nation states and/or the German language. Two of the writers explored in this collection come from Eastern Europe and only learnt German later in their lives (Petrowskaja, Salzmann) and the other two very decidedly live between various national and linguistic contexts (Honigmann, Menasse). It thus seems necessary to redefine contemporary Jewish writing in the German-language context in terms of transnationalism, transculturalism and translingualism. As Morris and others have pointed out, Jewish writing has in many ways always been situated and moving (in) between various national, cultural and linguistic attachments. We suggest, however, that Jewish writing needs to be brought together more systematically with other manifestations of transnationalism/transculturalism in the German-language context, such as German-Turkish writing and other literatures of (post-)migration (see Adelson; Lionnet/Shih; Yildiz 2012 on this). Writers like Petrowskaja and Salzmann also challenge prevalent notions of the German language in German-Jewish discourse, which is often still regarded as the language of the perpetrators. These two writers consciously adopt the German language as a means of emancipation from their Eastern European mother tongues. Furthermore, they explore the creative interplay between various languages, in which the idea of pure, original and neatly separated languages is destabilised. This collection therefore also makes a case for reading German-language Jewish writing as translingual writing – a growing field of research in the German-speaking context (see, for example, Kellman; Yildiz), that, however, has not yet been systematically applied to the Jewish setting.

*Reimagined Communities and Worldliness:* A major concern underpinning Deleuze and Guattari’s thinking on minority is the possibility of and need for new types of community which reflect the openness, porousness and mutability of languages and subjectivities. Many

of the writers discussed here share these concerns, not least because their work grapples with questions of migration, belonging and (dis-)placement. Interestingly, the forms of community (re-)imagined by many of the authors are based on fleeting associations, shifting allegiances and unforeseen constellations. Many of them broaden the boundaries of an ethnically defined Jewishness via “affiliative” (Hirsch) or “multidirectional” (Rothberg) practices, to include a range of non-Jewish experiences, histories and memories in their repertoire. In a similar vein to contemporary Jewish identities, the notion of a “Jewish” community emerges as a globalised, relational and shifting category. Jewishness, as it is imagined and presented by these writers, is literally and figuratively in touch with other subjectivities and worlds. It thus makes sense to (re-)read contemporary German-language Jewish writing as quintessentially cosmopolitan and as a manifestation of “world literature”, reflecting a broader transnationalisation and transculturalisation of recent German-language literature (Taberner; Hermann, Smith Prei & Taberner).

*Futurity:* German-language Jewish writing in the postwar period has, for obvious reasons, been focused on the past. The question of how to deal, psychologically, politically and artistically, with the aftermath of the Holocaust has dominated much Jewish writing in the German context, as well as scholarly engagements with the topic. While many of the writers examined here still reflect on the Nazi past in some form, they also increasingly attempt to stake out the future. The various ways in which they open up their and our understandings of Jewishness can plausibly be interpreted as strategies for producing “futurity” (Eshel). Jewish experiences of discrimination, persecution and trauma are being made available to coming generations and to non-German audiences, while also being put into dialogue with a range of other, globally occurring histories of violence. Such an approach promotes futurity in that it highlights the relevance of the past for “contemporary ethical and political concerns” (Eshel 10) as well as literature’s ability to “keep open the prospects of a better tomorrow” (Eshel 5). The issue of futurity also demonstrates how the specific case of contemporary German-language Jewish writing adds to Deleuze and Guattari’s framework, which does not explicitly reflect on futurity, even though it is arguably implied in their rethinking of community.

*Poetics and Contiguity:* An implicit preoccupation that brings together all the articles in this collection relates to the possible characteristics and shapes of a “minor” poetics. While none of the contributions here provide a definitive answer, it seems that certain stylistic and thematic features, such as intertextuality, intermediality, multiperspectivity, translanguaging and a general concern with “minor” – in other words, everyday – experiences, which often include a (gendered) focus on domesticity, intimacy and relationships, unite the various authors analysed. Moreover, it is interesting that many of the writers under consideration somehow break with the “major” form of the novel. They instead turn to – quite literally – smaller or “minor” genres, such as the short story collection (Menasse), or break up the classic form of the novel into various “minor”, non-chronological and multiperspectival, pieces (Honigmann, Menasse, Petrowskaja, Salzmann).

Their “minor” writing perhaps also encourages us to move away from what may in itself be a “major” concept: the idea that there are unifiable manifestations and traditions of Jewish writing. The articles assembled here testify to the extraordinary diversity and multi-layeredness of Jewish writing in the contemporary German-language context, while also uncovering alternative genealogies and writing traditions – for example in the case of Honigmann. Echoing Dan Miron’s re-examination of what we mean by Jewish literature, contemporary Jewish women’s writing in Germany and Austria needs to be approached as a “complex” (Miron 414), defined not so much by continuity but by contiguity, in other words the unforeseeable and often fleeting overlaps between various times, spaces, aesthetic and thematic concerns. It seems to us that the framework of the “minor” is particularly suited to explore such a necessary “new literary thinking”, which

must be [...] open-ended, never tie itself to any specific Jewish canon, and be ever ready to apply itself to whatever literary corpus experienced as 'Jewish' in the most inclusive sense of the term, even and particularly, when such corpus seems totally alien, in language, form, and content, to anything beforehand identified as 'Jewish'. (Miron 407)

The following collection of eight articles aims to reflect Miron's spirit of openness, inclusivity and exploration, not least by incorporating the logic of contiguity into its own composition. We have decided to approach each of the four authors via two articles written by different scholars, in the hope that this will bring out and produce various and fleeting overlaps and openings, not only within our diverse constellation of literary and philosophical source texts, but also between the academic pieces featured in this special issue. The collection opens with Barbara Honigmann, who is probably the most established writer of the four. Robert Gillet offers a careful examination of the ways in which Honigmann's work does and does not conform to what Deleuze and Guattari have to say about Kafka, on the one hand, and "minor literature", on the other, which enables him to shed an innovative light on both Honigmann's work and the paradigms of reception to which it has been subjected. Lena Ekelund focuses on literary depictions of mother–daughter relationships and textile imagery in the writings of Honigmann and Katja Petrowskaja, arguing that both function as a means to reflect on and establish alternative, "minor" genealogies and writing traditions.

Next is the prominent Austrian-Jewish writer Eva Menasse. Anita Bunyan explores the relationship between minor, mainstream and situational positionality in the work of Menasse, arguing that the theme of multiple affiliations or situational positionality lies at the heart of her novels and short stories. Echoing Robert Gillet's critical investigation of Deleuze and Guattari's framework, Myrto Aspioti shows, through a close reading of Menasse's *Quasikristalle* [Quasicrystals] (2013), that Menasse can be more productively viewed as a minority author, rather than as a minor author. Aspioti proposes that we understand the notion of "minority" in contemporary literature as a contextual feature relating to authors' public identities, that is, the ways in which they represent themselves, are marketed and received, rather than an innate political and linguistic feature of literary texts.

The collection then moves towards emerging voices in contemporary German-Jewish discourse, first concentrating on Katja Petrowskaja's oeuvre. Godela Weiss-Sussex suggests that reading Petrowskaja's highly successful debut *Vielleicht Esther* [Maybe Esther] (2014) in the context of minor literature as a literature of deterritorialisation highlights the sense of liberation and emphasises the creation of associations – aspects that are crucial to this transnational and translingual book about retrieving memory across space and time. The importance of deterritorialisation is also underscored by Sabine Egger, who interprets Petrowskaja's book as a poetic autobiography in which memory spaces constitute themselves by means of a poetics of deterritorialisation and multidirectionality.

The collection finishes with a relatively understudied yet highly promising writer and playwright, Sasha Marianna Salzmann. Annette Bühler-Dietrich demonstrates how Salzmann's debut novel *Außer Sich* can be usefully related to the notion of "minor literature", while simultaneously complementing this framework with Rosi Braidotti's work on nomadic ethics and on the posthuman. She foregrounds the concept of the relational subject as developed in the novel, as well as the link between its narrative structure and the exploration of time and anxiety. Maria Roca Lizarazu also highlights the usefulness of Deleuze and Guattari's thinking for analysing Salzmann's text, while, in a similar vein to Bühler-Dietrich, extending it – in this case, in the direction of Judith Butler's thoughts on the "ec-static" character of the self and interpersonal relationships. Based on Butler's notion of "ec-stasy", she demonstrates how *Außer Sich* develops an innovative politics and poetics of non-belonging, which connects Salzmann's writing with a broader "postmigrant" trajectory.

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