



Laurie Ruth Johnson (ed.),  
*Germany from the Outside.  
Rethinking German Cultural History  
in an Age of Displacement*

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In a world and age such as ours, where—due to the increasing mobility of people, goods and artistic artefacts—borders, differences and gaps between languages, cultures and identities need to be constantly renegotiated in a global and ever-changing perspective, national literary and cultural canons, whose roots most often lie in political, economic and socio-cultural interests coming from the ‘inside’, are now being challenged from the ‘outside’, that is to say from a new relational and holistic perspective on cultural products and practices. Such an approach aims to deconstruct, decolonize and dethrone cultural narratives and structures that have been dominant in those specific geopolitical spaces that have since centuries been identified as ‘nations’.

Within this framework, the volume *Germany from the Outside. Rethinking German Cultural History in an Age of Displacement*, edited by Laurie Ruth Johnson, presents 15 papers<sup>1</sup> that focus on Germany and ‘its’ cultural history though embodying “a

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<sup>1</sup> The featured papers represent the proceedings of a conference held in September 2019 at the University of Illinois – Urbana-Champaign.



cosmopolitan approach" (5) to the subject and showing how a new transnational, intersectional and non-identitary understanding of German literature—and, one might add, of the *Germanistik* as an academic discipline in itself<sup>2</sup>—could look like, were it to be observed from a different point of view, situated on the 'outside'.

That is the reason why the voices, the texts, but also the initiatives and structures that organize and categorize culture (such as archives), which are the protagonists of the featured studies, all reject, although in different ways, a monolithic conception of 'Germanness', and rather seek to "deconstruct the implicit binary relationship between 'inside' and 'outside', and the ways in which those shape identities" (3). Drawing on milestones of transcultural and colonial studies, such as Said and Spivak, and resorting to contemporary conceptions of *Weltliteratur*, the papers propose new ways of (re)interpreting and (re)defining German cultural and literary history that, as Venkat B. Mani argues, see "the native, the migrant, the refugee, and the foreign author as an essential condition for, and not an exception to, the formation of national and world literatures" (15), thus aiming to draw "hyperlinks" that unite internal and external perspectives and subvert dominant hierarchies and narratives (31-32).

The volume is divided into different chapters and investigates three trajectories along which hyperlinks of this kind can be traced. The first section—*Reading German Cultural History Differently*—is dedicated to the analysis of works of 'liminal' authors who, from different positions, have reflected on the concept of German (cultural but also social and political) identity. A concept, this, which, as Ruth Laurie Johnson argues in her reinterpretation of Fichte's 'nationalism', is highly relational and cannot under any circumstances disregard the existence of an 'outside' in/from which it actually originates despite all claims to the contrary. Such a dialectical approach to German identity is implemented by Brigit Tautz in her examination of the oeuvre—as well as of her efforts as a cultural mediator—of Friederike Brun, a German-speaking author and scholar from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century who lived, however, in Denmark, thus cultivating a unique relationship with her own cultural *Heimat* characterized by an attitude of "domesticized cosmopolitanism" (38). David D. Kim, on the other hand, chooses to take a radical look 'from the outside in': on the basis of a close reading of J.M. Coetzee's novel *Elizabeth Costello* and by pinpointing its strong intertextual references to works of Kafka and Hofmannsthal, he is able to demonstrate how the South African author offers a new deterritorialized way of reading the German literary canon and history, capable of opening up new perspectives for its interpretation and rewriting.

The second section of the volume—*Stories of Expulsion, Exile, and Displacement*—focuses mostly on so-called 'touching tales' (Adelson), retracing stories of exile, forced migration and displacement experienced by authors who transcend the real and ideal boundaries of what is considered German and are thus forced to come to terms with

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<sup>2</sup> Indeed, as pointed out in the introduction (1-2), the approach chosen is certainly not new to the discipline of *German Studies*, a field of academic studies that does not merely refer to the North-American analogue of the so-called *Germanistik* (with its well know distinction between *Inland-* and *Auslandsgermanistik*), but rather designates a field of study that broadens its view from a typically philological and text-oriented perspective to interests that encompass wide-ranging philosophical, cultural, social and political issues and that are by their very nature not exclusively 'German'.



their own identity and eccentric positioning within (or rather: outside) the German literary canon. Personal life trajectories, such as those of Albert Vigoleis Thelen, which he later poured into his autobiographical works, analysed by Carl Niekerk, or of Rudolf Schrenk, reconstructed by Bettina Brandt thanks to the consultation of archive material in the USA, and of Hans Keilson, as shown by Anna M. Parkinson, reflect the universal experience of forced flight and exile due to National Socialism and the need for a continuous intimate but at the same time also public renegotiation not only of the 'German' identity but also of the notion of Germany itself. The figure of the refugee, the banished, the renegade becomes fundamental here to give voice to biographies that, bound to processes of constant mobility, trauma and marginalisation, represent exemplary models for the definition of a German identity, and consequently of a German cultural canon, capable of also complying with fluid conceptions of Germanness.

No less relevant in this regard are the experiences of those who, for the most disparate reasons, were forced to leave their *Heimat* for Germany, where they had to endure mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion, sometimes even conflicting with each other. It is the case of Julia da Silva Bruhns, Heinrich and Thomas Mann's mother, whose forced relocation from her native Brazil to Lübeck is retraced by Veronika Feuchtner through an analysis of the woman's own "autoethnography" (157) *Aus Dodos Kindheit*. Experiences of exile, cultural uprooting and fragmented belonging to an identity are transnational and transcultural by nature, whereby their literary reworking proves the "inherently universal character of literature as multiply connected and referential" (110). This universal character is well brought to light by Azade Seyhan, who, by comparing three authors united across time and space by the experience of exile from their homeland—Heinrich Heine, Nâzım Hikmet and Emine Sevgi Özdamar—illustrates how, despite individual peculiarities, Özdamar's oeuvre combines aspects of both Heine's and Hikmet's works and, beyond that, of Turkish and German cultural traditions, without obsessively marking their relational difference but rather synthesizing them into "new forms of cognition and recognition" (126).

Such an approach characterizes also the third and last section—*Rewriting German Culture*—, which deals with more practical cases of (re)writing, (re)shaping and (re)organizing the German cultural and literary canon. At the centre of attention are concrete cultural practices, such as the structuring power of archives, but also reflections on the materiality of writing, on the power of translation and on the representation of marginalized and 'invisible' communities in literary texts, films and on theatre stages. Gizem Arslan thus relates Vilém Flusser's thoughts on the medium of writing with those of Yoko Tawada, displaying how the Japanese author's 'alienated' and 'oriental' vision constitutes not only a form of "resistance both to Eurocentrism and a unilinear temporal order epitomised by, but not limited to, Flusser's theories of writing" (225), but also a possibility of intercultural and intersubjective encounter that reveals the power of a true "contrapuntal reading" (Said). Claudia Breger discusses and investigates Marica Bodrožić and Deniz Utlu's digital archival project *Unterhaltungen deutscher Eingewanderten*: inverting the title of Goethe's famous novella cycle, the website is built as a space where documents, voices (as in recordings of interviews,



*Lesungen* and talks) and various materials of authors linked to the experience of migration and flight are embedded without any solution of continuity or hierarchy, tracing new 'hyperlinks' each time: in this way, the archive also reflects its 'theme' on a structural level, illuminating that mobility and migrancy of experiences and texts that is one of the hallmarks (albeit often ignored) of German-language literature. Mobility—understood instead as the dialectical transfer of ideas—is also at the centre of Chungjie Zahn's paper, which considers Brecht's *Me-ti. Buch der Wendungen*, a pseudotranslation of the *Mozi*, the most important ancient Chinese text of Mohism, demonstrating, on the one hand, the reasons and transnational intellectual paths that led to the revival of Mohism in the early 20th century and, on the other hand, Brecht's aesthetic-political approach to translation, seen as a "trans-situational movement between historical periods, ideological orientations, and civilizations" (321).

Finally, the volume investigates practices and strategies that promote the representation of marginalized communities in different media: Lucas Riddle shows how humour is employed in the novels *Ellbogen* by Fatma Aydemir and *Der Russe ist einer, der Birken liebt* by Olga Grjasnowa in order to create "hybrid local identities" (261) that hence become visible, also giving rise to mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion that not only affect the protagonists but also the readers themselves, who are confronted with their own cognitive *biases* regarding such hybrid identities. The presence—or rather, lack of presence—of PoC, Black persons in particular, in contemporary German cinema is investigated by Berna Gueneli, who, after a thorough examination of the socio-political conditions that cause the marginalization of this group of people in the field of film production, analyses three filmic works by Black German women—Sheri Hagen's *Auf den zweiten Blick*, Ines Johnson-Spain's *Becoming Black* and Amelia Umuhire's *Polyglot*—in which members of the Black German community are portrayed, focusing both on how they interact with the city of Berlin as a multi-lingual and multi-ethnic space and on the various strategies of representation and normalisation employed by the directors. Olivia Landry closes this overview with an examination of the theatrical production *Hamletmaschine*, performed by the Exil Ensemble, a theatre group formed by refugee actors and theatre workers: the already "unstable, absurd, and violent text" (325) by Heiner Müller is employed by the group to illustrate the vicissitudes of war violence, flight and exile, whose inhumanity is reinforced by the choice of bringing to the stage the liminal figure of the clown, striking emblem of the refugee stripped of all his rights and thus excluded from humanity itself.

Just as the papers trace new trajectories of interpretation, merging authors, works and aspects seemingly distant and located on opposite sides of that ideal boundary which separate the 'inside' from the 'outside', hence deconstructing it, the volume itself exemplifies in its entirety that texture of ideas, voices and identities that do form and give substance to the German literary canon and cultural history. It thus offers a model for a new way of understanding German-language literature through an open, multivectoral and multimedial perspective that challenges not only the much-debated concept of *Deutsche Leitkultur* but also 'German' culture in itself and the way how we, as scholars and students, approach it.



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