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“Towards a Queer Reading of Female Perpetrators”

Paper Draft / Outline

“When the media turns its attention to genocides, it often relies on received gender-stereotypes. These same stereotypes likewise are evident in documents circulated by perpetrators of genocide. It is also the case that these same stereotypes persist in academic scholarship concerned with genocide.” —James Snow, “Mothers and Monsters: Women, Gender, and Genocide,” in *A Gendered Lens for Genocide Prevention*, ed. Mary Michele Connellan and Christiane Fröhlich (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 49-83.

In the popular imagination, few figures appear more queer than the women at the heart of the Nazi concentrationary system, around whom the boundaries of heteronormativity are repeatedly redrawn. At least since the Allied war trials, such women have been cast as sexual and gendered deviants. On the one hand, they seemed to transgress the bounds of acceptable femininity through their violence. On the other, reports zoom in on their excessive, if not transgressive, sexuality. By way of illustration, Ilse Koch, married to a camp commander, was variously known as the “Bitch,” “Red Witch,” and “Beast” of Buchenwald. After she became pregnant in Allied captivity, the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* (09.10.1948) described her as a “Venus Callipyge” and a “sphinx” who matched her husband in terms of “arrogance, exorbitance, brutal caprice, and megalomania.” Her sadism (she is rumoured to have ordered gloves and lampshades to be made from human skin) and affairs were tabloid fodder. Other recurrent themes are the alleged homosexuality and sadism of female guards like Irma Grese, who was rumoured to use female inmates for sex before sending them to their death (Lengyel, 1947). In the cultural imaginary, such women often appear “more cruel than men, not because of the nature of the atrocities they are said to have committed, but either because of the pleasure, usually erotic, they enjoyed while tormenting women prisoners, or because the women’s acts of cruelty either collide with their physical beauty or express their physical ugliness” (Heschel 2006, 305). This level of fascination may have something to do with the “exceptional status” of female guards, who made up only about 10% of all camp staff. As Mailänder (2015) suggests, then, “it was easier to document the[ir] criminal acts,” which are remembered “much more vividly and with greater precision” than those committed by the more numerous (and therefore arguably more indistinguishable) male guards (270).

The extent to which female guards deviated from current norms of femininity was a prominent concern in trial proceedings and media accounts of their activities. For Heschel, then, it is hardly surprising that gender stereotypes found their way into historical and literary accounts of women guards. Scholars have emphasized the similarities between Grese and Hanna Schmitz from Bernhard Schlink’s international bestseller *The Reader* (1995). Hanna’s post-war relationship with the teenaged Michael further suggests that there is something wrong in her sexual hard-wiring. In his 1971 novel, *Ring of Fire*, Hans Lebert centred his symbolic narrative of Austrian degeneracy on a sexually voracious female guard,

Hilde, who has multiple abortions and lusts after her half-brother. In his 1999 documentary novel, *The Woman in Fur*, Lukas Hartmann fictionalizes the life of Carmen Mory, a Swiss woman who became a spy for the Gestapo and operated for a short time as a double agent for the French before being arrested in Germany and sent to Ravensbrück. After the war, a British military tribunal sentenced her to death for crimes that she committed as a block chief. Hartmann not only imagines the close friendship between Mory and her closest friend in the camp in intimate terms. The obvious intertext of the title conjures up Sacher-Masoch's 1870 novella about sadomasochistic desire. Even female authors struggle to avoid the pitfalls of such clichéd accounts of female violence. When Renate Wolff reconstructs the life of a lower-class camp guard in her 1989 novel, *The Abyssal Zone*, the chapter on her time in an unnamed camp focuses on the developing lesbian relationship between Ella and another guard. In the autobiographical novel, *Let me Go*, published in Italy in 2001, it is implied that the concentration camps gave Helga Schneider's mother the opportunity to enact perverse pleasures that she is forced to repress in later life—and which find expression in the hysterical gestures of an ageing woman. While Wolff and Schlink imply the androgynous, female masculinity of their figures, other authors convey the excessive—and therefore dubious—feminine performances of their protagonists. These works show how compelling—if not alluring—the links between “Nazism and perverse desire” remain (Moore 2011, 232). These representations reinforce heteronormative ideas that position gender identities and sexuality “dichotomously as morally good or bad” (Bryant and Schofield 2007, 324).

The highly stereotypical character of many accounts of female perpetrators—judicial, autobiographical, and legal—has created something of a critical impasse, whereby scholars identify and historicize clichés in texts, without offering new ways of reading and responding to the representations in question. As a result, we run the risk of reaffirming the very clichés we attempt to challenge. In my research, I want to think through the following questions:

- To what extent does the gender binary continue to shape critical discussion of female perpetrators?
- Do we need to continue to develop the use of gender as a “category of analysis” (in the sense of Joan Scott, 1986)?
- How might we read against the grain of the “queer archetypes” that recur in cultural representations of female perpetrators?
- Does the play with symbolism and ambiguity in some fiction make this genre particularly helpful for thinking through ways to “queer” critical practice?

These questions are the prompt for my queer reading of literary representations of female concentration camp guards that begins to dislodge essentialized “categories and identities” as primary frames for reading. I employ “queer” along the lines of David Buchbinder (1998), who suggests that queering a text, or taking a queer readerly approach, “creates the possibility of resistance” against the compulsion to read appearances against normative ideas about gender and sexuality (164). To quote Sedgwick (2003), moreover, such a queer approach “spins the term outward along dimensions that can't be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all: the ways that race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality crisscross with these and other identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses, for example” (9). By

bringing “queerness” to bear on representations of female perpetrators, then, I am recognizing that these representations force us into a “questioning stance” that “lets us explore the taken for granted and the familiar from new vantage points” (Piontek 2006, 2).

The novels:

Bernhard Schlink’s *The Reader* (1995) has three parts, all narrated from the perspective of Michael Berg. The first begins in his teenage years, when he meets and embarks on a sexual affair with a 36-year-old woman, Hanna Schmitz, who eventually disappears from his life without a trace. The second section picks up when Michael is studying law at university. He re-encounters Hanna when he observes one of the major concentration camp trials and sees his former lover sitting in the docks—as a defendant. As the trial progresses, Michael pieces together the dots from their time together, and her behaviour in court, realizing that Hanna is illiterate. Ultimately, Hanna is sentenced to life in prison for her activities during the Third Reich, receiving a harsher sentence than her co-defendants due to her inability to “read” the legal process and refute defamatory documents. The final section of the book sees Michael still obsessed with Hanna and plagued by his love for her. He starts to send his former lover recorded tapes of books—and eventually Hanna teaches herself to read. She becomes a model prisoner and starts to confront her responsibility by reading Holocaust literature. On the day that she is due to get early release, she commits suicide.

Helga Schneider’s *Let me Go* was first published in Italian in 2001—and soon followed by an English translation in 2001 and German translation in 2003. Schneider grew up in Nazi Germany and has become famous in her new home, Italy, where she has published several bestselling autobiographical childhood accounts. *Let me Go* is also autobiographical. It reconstructs a meeting in 1998 between the authorial alter ego and her mother who was an early activist in the Nazi party and left her husband and young children to work at Auschwitz Birkenau. Mentally and physically infirm, she now resides in a nursing home in Vienna. Schneider’s fictional alter ego is clear that the meeting will be the last chance for her to get answers. Why did her mother join the Party? Why did she leave her children? What exactly did she do in the camps?

In order to develop a queer reading of these texts, I ask:

- What sort of gendered language is used to characterize the female perpetrator figures?
- Is there a conflict between external perceptions of these characters and their self-presentation?
- How does the discussion of their activities during the Third Reich intersect with the gendered domains of the domestic and sexual?
- What tensions emerge in the novels as they consider the motivations and causes for the women’s involvement in the Holocaust?
- Do these tensions facilitate a reading of such figures as “queer” since—in the words of Kosofsky Sedgwick (2013)—the narrative meaning ascribed to them seems “mysterious, excessive, or oblique in relation to the codes most readily available to us” (538)?

- Do the novels contain any other “queer moments” (structurally and diegetically) that exposes the contingency of the interpretations they espouse (and the normalizing ends they serve)?

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