

Motherhood as Performance:
(Re)Negotiations of Motherhood in Contemporary
German Literature

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In her controversial and popular book *Das Eva Prinzip: Für eine neue Weiblichkeit* 'The Eve Principle: For a New Femininity' (2006), Eva Herman pressed women to give up the "männliche Aufgaben" 'masculine tasks' of the workplace and instead to do "was wir am besten können: ein warmes Nest bauen" 'that which we can do best: build a warm nest' (28 and 80).¹ In the ensuing debates surrounding the social significance of motherhood and the declining birth-rate in Germany, motherhood was described (sarcastically) as "eine Art Bürgerpflicht" 'a kind of civic duty,' whereby the duty of reinvigorating the German population falls primarily on women (Haaf, Klingner, and Streidl 162). Indeed, the country seems obsessed with motherhood—less so with fatherhood or parenthood—as the birth rate declines and the media cover the various steps being taken to counter this trend, such as an increase in the paid leave time (*Elternzeit* 'parental leave') that new parents may have from their jobs.² This very measure, along with a push to increase the number of day care opportunities for children, points to the fact that, rather than returning to the nest as called for by Herman, Germans are actually seeking to combine career and family. Looking for a way to do this, women in their twenties and thirties are advocating for a return to feminism, to pick up where the women's movement left off. In 2008, *Der Spiegel* asserted that: "Das Versagen der Frauenbewegung in diesem Punkt hat dazu beigetragen, dass Frauen in Deutschland Beruf und Familie so schlecht vereinbaren können wie in kaum einem anderen europäischen Land" 'The failure of the

women's movement in this regard has contributed to the fact that women in Germany have a harder time reconciling work with family than in almost any other European country' (Dürr 139).³ As a younger generation of women sets out to solve the dilemma of combining motherhood with a career (a challenge certainly addressed by the *Altfeministinnen*, or 'old feminists,' if not resolved to the new feminists' liking), authors, artists, and other public figures engage with the issue of motherhood.⁴

One question that underlies this discussion is: What is a good mother? Despite the number of self-help books on the subject, there is no definitive answer. Instead, this essay asks how recent German-language literature by women conceives the maternal. My investigation is based on the assumption that it is easier to define something by saying what it is not; thus, the three texts discussed here focus on bad mothers, women who are critiqued by authors who—regardless of their personal relationships with feminism—engage with feminist topics in their texts. These three multi-generational novels provide an opportunity to consider the representations of more than one mother within each work. Generational conflict has long been a significant factor in conceptualizing the maternal. In *Himmelskörper* 'Heavenly Bodies' (2003) by Tanja Dückers, two sets of mother-daughter relationships follow the pattern of a daughter criticizing the choices of her mother. Despite its thoughtful investigations of personal and political history, Dückers's novel does not conceive of motherhood in a new way; instead, the mothers cease to exist beyond the imagination of the daughters and function primarily as a means for the daughters to develop their own subjectivity. *Die Gunnar-Lennefsen-Expedition* 'The Gunnar Lennefsen Expedition' (1998) by Kathrin Schmidt features a strongly matriarchal family structure. While the novel does represent complex and compelling female characters, who do indeed have passions and pursuits outside of the family (i.e., their own subjectivity independent of the role of mother), ultimately this novel does not move beyond essentialist (although empowering) notions of motherhood and femininity. Finally, Julia Franck's *Die Mittagsfrau* 'The Blind Side of the Heart' (2007; 2009) puts forth a dramatically different conception of motherhood. In addition to allowing mothers their own subjectivity (and subtly condemning those women who exist only for their children),

Franck conceives of motherhood as a performative identity, in the sense that Judith Butler described gender as performative. I extend this notion one step further with the concept of maternal drag, which expands on Butler's theorization of cross-dressing. Unlike the works of her contemporaries, which base their representations of motherhood on conventional notions of the maternal, Franck's novel moves discussions of motherhood forward, theorizing the maternal as a socially constructed role and one that is radically open to resignification.

Motherhood, Psychoanalysis, and Performativity

When searching for a theoretical framework through which to examine motherhood (and especially the relationship between mothers and daughters), the vast majority of scholars turn to psychoanalysis, drawing on Freud's theories of girls' psycho-sexual development, although often in a revised form.⁵ In 1978, Nancy Chodorow published her groundbreaking work, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, which uses object-relations theory to expand upon Freud's theories of mother-daughter attachment. The significance of this book for feminist psychoanalytic scholarship cannot be underestimated, as it created a framework within which attachment to the mother was accorded much greater importance in the child's (especially the female child's) development. Chodorow reads the mother-daughter relationship as both a product of the patriarchal society in which it was created and an attachment pattern that reifies this social structure: patriarchy manipulates the concept of motherhood to suit its needs. This conception is internalized by women as they become mothers, and then they pass it on to their daughters. The daughters learn how to mother both from their mothers and from patriarchal society, perpetuating the cycle. Today many scholars point to the fact that the particular political climate in which Chodorow wrote her book likely motivated her to prove that motherhood is a social construction and not a natural state.⁶ Furthermore, despite the significance of Chodorow's deconstruction of motherhood, her theory ultimately does not extend into the deconstruction of sexuality, gender, and bodies.⁷ While other theorists continue to articulate feminist interpretations of psychoanalysis, and, in doing so, to increase the importance and influence of the mother in the psychoanalytic

paradigm, they have not fundamentally questioned one of its basic principles: namely, the gender binary male/female and its implications for parenting.⁸

Since the publication of Butler's *Gender Trouble* in 1990, however, it is commonly accepted that this gender binary no longer stands. For Butler, all identities are constantly in flux, always in the process of becoming. Beginning with Simone de Beauvoir's famous statement that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (267), Butler regards gender identity as a process for which there is no end. She describes it as "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler 45). It is key in Butler's theory that no identity exists prior to these acts—they come into being through the performance. As she points out, "A great deal of feminist theory and literature has ... assumed that there is a 'doer' behind the deed," a natural conclusion as agency presupposes an agent. Yet Butler speaks not of performance but of the performativity of gender, because: "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (34). I extend the concept of gender performativity, as others have done before me, to apply to the performance of other identities, in this case to the performance of maternal identity.⁹ The first two novels that I consider, although interesting for other reasons, do not represent motherhood as a performative identity, but rather as one that is in some way inherent or biologically determined.

Maternal Subjectivity in *Himmelskörper*

When Freia, the protagonist of Dücker's *Himmelskörper*, cuts off her childhood braids, she self-consciously breaks with her mother (who also wore braids) and her grandmother (who braided both their hair). As a teenager, she shaves her head and adopts an androgynous appearance to maintain this rift symbolically and to keep her mother (and femininity) at bay. Her pregnancy, however, forces her to consider her femininity, her place within the family, and her family's history. Maternal identity in this book, although a recurring concern, is overshadowed by two other plot lines: first, told in

flashbacks, Freia's sexual awakening (during which period of disillusionment she learns about her parents' dysfunctional marriage and her family's complicated history); and, second, the discovery of her grandparents' flight from Gdynia (Gotenhafen) and the sinking of the *Wilhelm Gustloff* at the end of World War II. Rightly so, the vast majority of press coverage and scholarship on *Himmelskörper* focuses on this second part of the plot and how the *Enkelgeneration*, or 'generation of grandchildren,' understands its own connection to the Nazi past.¹⁰ Yet, like the other books I will discuss, this text also points to the fact that family history (especially motherhood) and political history are intertwined.

Much of the new feminists' criticism of the *Altfeministinnen* and their contributions to the question of motherhood is echoed in new literature by women. Indeed, generational conflict is at the heart of *Himmelskörper*. The men in the story are at once "einsam und frei" 'lonely and free' (255) and, during times of stress, "[d]ie Männer glänzten durch Abwesenheit ..." 'the men were conspicuous in their absence' (256).¹¹ By contrast, the backbone of the family, the true keepers of history, are the women. Yet Freia harshly criticizes her own mother and is even disinclined to accept their biological connection: "Der Gedanke, daß Renate meine Mutter ist, kam mir unwirklich vor" 'The thought that Renate is my mother seemed unreal to me' (14). In the first chapter, Freia is quick to catalog the ways in which Renate fails to meet her expectations of motherhood, being too delicate, too quiet, and too passive to be properly maternal: "[M]eistens fand ich meine Mutter langweilig" 'Most of the time I found my mother boring' (15).

Spurred by her own pregnancy and her curiosity about family history (which clearly relates to her pregnancy), Freia begins to spend time with her mother. To her surprise, Freia enjoys their conversations (although getting to know her mother better was not her primary goal), but the glimpses that she gains into her mother's life leave her bewildered and at times impatient, unable to understand her mother's point of view. For example, Freia remains critical of Renate's unwillingness to acknowledge her husband's extramarital affairs, and she cannot comprehend her mother's reluctance to have a flirtation of her own. She does not understand that Renate's anti-authoritarian childrearing style (which made her a virtual non-en-

tity for Freia as she was growing up) is a direct response to her own mother Jo's authoritarianism. Jo shushes her daughter when she speaks—in effect bullying Renate into silence and anonymity, which manifests itself both in her inability to tell her own version of the family's flight from Gdynia and in her unsatisfactory mothering of Freia. Renate's suicide—unexplained and unexplored in the novel, though presumably linked to her feelings of complicity and guilt—denies Freia the opportunity to get to know her mother better. Ultimately, the reader is left with the impression that this is a perpetual cycle: daughters rebel against their mothers and think that they can correct (if not understand) their mother's supposed wrongs.

While this book challenges the assumption that there is an inherent emotional connection between mothers and daughters, it ultimately fails to create subjectivity for the mothers. In *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, Marianne Hirsch writes of “the uneasy relation between feminist discourse and maternal discourse” (164) and argues: “Feminist writing and scholarship, continuing in large part to adopt *daughterly* perspectives, can be said to collude with patriarchy in placing mothers into the position of object—thereby keeping mothering outside of representation and maternal discourse a theoretical impossibility” (163, emphasis in the original). Indeed, Freia's interest in her matriarchal family history is less motivated by curiosity about the other women in her family than about her own relationship to that history: she does not ask what burden Renate is carrying, but whether she and her child must continue to carry the burden of her family's complicity in Nazi Germany. In the opening scene of the novel, Freia chances to see her mother at a train station and has the opportunity to view her as a stranger. The discomfort of this moment brings her to the edge of tears, and her thoughts quickly turn away from her mother to herself and her own position in the family. As a daughter she cannot comprehend what her mother thinks about other than her children.

Towards the end of the novel, Freia learns the facts about her family's involvement in the Nazi period: that her grandparents were firm believers in the party and that her mother, five years old at the time, denounced their neighbors, securing a place for her family on the ship *Theodor*. The neighbors were placed instead on the *Wilhelm Gustloff* and drowned when it sank. After this revelation, Freia

remains awake into the night, suffering from false labor and feeling oppressed by her existence as a link in the chain of her family:

Ich bekam jetzt ein Kind wie so viele andere Frauen. Ich würde die Geschichte fortschreiben. ... Ich hing auf einmal mittendrin, der braune Strich, der auf unseren Stammbaum ... alle Familienmitglieder miteinander verband, würde nicht bei [mir] aufhören, sondern durch mich hindurch und weiter gehen.

I was having a child now, like so many other women. I would continue to write the history. ... All of a sudden, I was in the middle of it, the brown line in our family tree that connects all family members with one another would not end with [me], but would go through me and go further. (254)

Notably, the novel ends just after Freia gives birth (to a girl), suggesting both the inevitability of the role of mother/history keeper but also the impossibility, within the confines of this text, of being both a mother and a subject. There is some indication that Freia will attempt a new model of parenting, in that she and her child will live together, while the child's father (Freia's partner) resides in a different apartment in the building. Yet this is more a critique of marriage than of conventional maternity, and we never learn what maternal role Freia creates for herself.

The Maternal Body: *Die Gunnar-Lennefsen-Expedition*

The connection between the historical and the maternal resonates also with Schmidt's *Die Gunnar-Lennefsen-Expedition*. Set in the East German town of W. in 1976, the book has at its center a constellation of three women: Josepha, 21 and pregnant with a biracial child; her great-grandmother Therese, with whom Josepha shares an apartment; and Therese's daughter Ottilie, who—living in the West—gives birth to a son at the age of 61. Josepha's own mother died in childbirth: "Ihr eigenes Leben hatte Josepha am Tag ihrer Geburt wie einen Staffelstab von der Mutter übernommen und an deren Grab einige Tage später, auf dem Arm ihres Vaters, laut gebrüllt" 'Josepha had taken up her own life on the day of her birth like a baton from her mother and a couple of days later at her mother's grave had screamed loudly in her father's arms' (11). Her father leaves Josepha to Therese's care early on (for reasons beyond

his control, as becomes clear later in the novel), in effect leaving Josepha with a gaping hole in her family, which is perceived as a loss more because of the lack of information about her maternal lineage than the absence of her parents (although she misses her father terribly). Together Josepha and Therese undertake the Gunnar-Lennefsen Expedition, a journey into their (decidedly matriarchal) family history as projected onto an imaginary screen in their living room. This journey into “den äußersten Norden ihrer weiblichen Gedächtnisse” ‘the deep North of their female memories’ has the goal of “dem in Josephas Bauch wachsenden Kinde eine Geschichte zu schaffen” ‘providing a history to the child growing in Josepha’s womb’ (19)—and, of course, to Josepha herself.¹² As in *Himmelskörper*, the pregnant mother-to-be finds it impossible to give birth to a child without understanding her own place within the family. Peppered with magical realism and marked by a strong sense of the corporeal, this novel has been compared to other *Familien-* or *Generationenromane* ‘family or generational novels’ of the German literary canon, namely Günter Grass’s *Die Blechtrommel* ‘The Tin Drum’ (1959) and Irmtraud Morgner’s feminist tome, *Leben und Abenteuer der Trobadora Beatriz nach Zeugnissen Ihrer Spielfrau Laura* ‘The Life and Adventures of Trobadora Beatrice as Chronicled by Her Minstrel Laura’ (1974).¹³ Certainly there is something satisfying about thinking of this book as an answer to Grass: this is history seen through the eyes of women, felt and experienced through their bodies. It is precisely this focus on bodies, however, that makes the book’s attitude towards women “either essentialist or postfeminist” (Marven 161) and makes its complex representations of motherhood problematic.

That Otilie gives birth at age 61 to a child of three fathers, and that the child comes to term after only three months is just one wonder in a series of miraculous birth-related plot developments. Another child, Mirabella, is born to four mothers and a man who is both her father and grandfather; Ljusja is born three times (by different women); and a third child, Adam Rippe, is born when his mother (Ljusja) cuts a rib from her lover’s body (with her *Damentaschenmesserchen*, or small lady’s pocket knife): “meinen sohn [sic] habe ich ... entworfen nach meinem plan [sic]....” ‘I have designed my son according to my plan,’ says Ljusja, and this act of creation

elevates her to that of (a) god; the power to give life makes supernatural mothers of most of the women in the novel. Consider, for example, Carola Hebenstreit (Josepha's maternal great-grandmother), who gives birth to premature twin girls and revives them from the brink of death by nursing them with milk that "in zwei peitschenden Strahlen aus den Brüsten tritt" 'exits the breasts in two flogging streams' (80-1) and is so powerful that the tiny babies double in size each time they drink.

The representation of the female body in this book is at once subversive and problematic. One can interpret the bodies as dazzlingly positive and supernaturally powerful, a glorification of the female body that Peter Graves problematizes because of

the undifferentiated way in which the ascendancy of women over men is presented as due entirely to the vigour of the female reproductive organs. The result is an undeniably lively romp ..., but it is one that reduces the battle of the sexes to mere biology. Despite its superficial feminist credentials, therefore, *Die Gunnar-Lennefsen-Expedition* cannot disguise an essentialist view of women that is curiously old-fashioned. (203)

Other scholars, such as Marven and Friederike Eigler, have disputed Graves's dismissive view and argued that "[t]he sheer corporeality of *Die Gunnar-Lennefsen-Expedition* ... is also subject to irony, visible not least in the fantastic exaggeration" (Marven 165). One could interpret the exaggerated focus on the body as an ironic, parodic answer to the glorification of women's biology (namely, their ability to bear children). But this would also be to interpret the representations of the female body as unfailingly positive. At times, the very exaggeration of the corporeal is grotesque. Marven sees Schmidt as a clear descendant of Morgner and one whose text makes uncomfortably clear how literature still awkwardly struggles with representing the female body, in both positive and negative terms. She asks, "Does the self-consciousness of the text—the intertextuality and especially the arch narrative voice—save Schmidt from the charge of biological essentialism?" (165). The question is posed with good reason, for if the destabilization of gender identities—and of sex and bodies—is such a widely accepted step in feminist scholarship, then the close connection between body and identity in *Die Gunnar-Lennefsen-Expedition* is deeply problematic. This ambiguo-

ous attitude towards women's bodies in the book is encapsulated in Therese's marriage to Adolf Erbs, who admits that, "[D]er Gedanke, mit zwei regelmäßig menstruierenden Frauen zusammenleben zu müssen, flößt ihm einen tiefen Schrecken ein..." "The thought of being forced to live with two regularly menstruating women terrified him deeply..." (Schmidt 51). He, by contrast, is fascinated with the science and removal of gallstones, kidney stones, and other calcified deposits. Erbs works illegally as a surgeon, removing stones from patients—and then eats them. In this section, Schmidt brings to light—and makes laughable—the association of the female body with the grotesque; after all, what could be more grotesque than what Erbs, as a representative of the male medical profession, is doing? And Schmidt does repeatedly show ways in which patriarchy (with science, reason, and logic) is at odds with women's bodies (and their intuition, cycles, and magic). In so doing, however, Schmidt runs the risk of simultaneously underscoring (rather than dismantling) the dichotomy between "[d]ieser masculine Aufklärungsdrang" 'this masculine urge to explain rationally, or to enlighten' (96) and the alliance between femininity and nature/the irrational that decades of scholarship has tried to dissolve.¹⁴

For Eigler, the representation of the female body is significant, since she reads the female body in this novel as a site of patriarchal control and argues that this is where the novel's subversive quality lies: "Schwangerschaft und Mutterschaft werden also nicht idealisiert oder naturalisiert, sondern in den Kontext konkreter gesellschaftlicher Bedingungen gestellt" 'Pregnancy and motherhood are not idealized or naturalized, but rather put into the context of concrete societal conditions' (270), especially when the identity of the father has direct consequences for the mother and child's treatment in society. For example, as a young woman, Therese aborts the child conceived by her lover, who belongs to a noble family and is about to enter an arranged marriage. Eigler persuasively argues that the focus on women's bodies in *Die Gunnar-Lennefsen-Expedition* is actually a focus on women's bodies under patriarchy, and that motherhood and pregnancy in the novel cannot be divorced from the patriarchal society in which they take place. Despite what Eigler calls the "fehlende Präsenz der Männer" 'the missing presence of men,' they materially affect the experiences of the women and children in the

novel—such as the father of Josepha's black and white child.

While Eigler explains the men's absence by the "unabhängige Existenz der meisten Frauenfiguren" 'independent life of most of the female characters' (272), I argue that the reverse is actually the case: the women are able (or forced) to be independent only when the men are absent or ineffectual. For example, Therese is pressured as a young single mother to marry the repulsive Erbs, but it is his early death that enables Therese to live her life as she would wish. It is this very absence of men, however, that holds the key to the role of motherhood in the novel: as in *Himmelskörper*, the mothers in this book are the keepers of history, and the men are, thus, unimportant.

It is for this reason, and not for their bodily functions alone, that the mothers of the novel develop magical significance. When Josepha and Therese watch movie-like projections of their family history in their living room, together they encounter a litany of fascinating maternal characters with a remarkable degree of agency: these women have sex, are intimately familiar with (and comfortable with) male and female bodies, they have good and not-so-good relationships with their children, they love and hate and marry and avoid marriage (and manipulate it to their own ends) (Eigler 271-72). They work in a variety of different capacities and jobs, from housework to farm work, from jobs in shops to jobs in factories. They also do not cease to have their own lives and desires after giving birth (as is the case according to Freudian psychoanalysis). Significantly, they are able to express their own subjectivities; it would seem that their stories are not told by others or limited by others' perspectives. Yet their presence in the novel *is* limited by exactly that which gives them significance: birth. Giving birth is the link that chains these women together: their *raison d'être* seems to be to have children, whether they are conscious of this or not. Certainly what is interesting about them to Therese and Josepha is which child or children they bore. Regardless of the passionate and complex lives they lead, their significance in the story is their role in the family tree. In conclusion, the focus on the female body is a red herring, in that it can lead readers to conclude that Schmidt is aggrandizing the role of women's bodies. In a way, she is, but not simply for their ability to give birth; instead it is for their roles as keepers and creators

of family history.

Maternal Drag: *Die Mittagsfrau*

For Franck's *Die Mittagsfrau*, the element of speech is key. When the protagonist, Helene, ceases to communicate with her son, her function as a mother and keeper of family history is effectively abandoned. The question of maternal subjectivity returns in this novel as well, which presents portraits of two mothers, both negative and controversial. Franck uses these two mothers—and other mother figures throughout the book—to critique both styles of mothering and assumptions made about motherhood.

Selma Würsich, mother of the protagonist Helene, is a quintessential madwoman in the attic: a woman trapped by social conventions within a domestic life that drives her insane.¹⁵ Already alienated by her community because of her Jewish heritage, Selma is driven to madness by the deaths of four infant sons. She acts out a grotesque masquerade of maternal domesticity, rocking the small body of her son for days after he has died, conserving orange peels and broken dishes for secret or forgotten reasons, and carefully storing her collection of hats and trimmings in boxes infested by maggots. She feels no connection to her two living daughters, who learn to flee her verbal and physical abuse. As Selma retreats further into insanity and depression, she refuses to leave her second-floor bedroom, leaving Helene both to long for and fear her mother. In the book's first chapter, Helene's sister is combing Selma's hair, when Selma bursts into a rage:

But while Mother shouted at her daughters, cursing them, complaining that she'd given birth to a couple of useless brats, Helene kept on and on repeating the same thing like a prayer: May I comb your hair? Her voice quivered: May I comb your hair? As a pair of scissors flew through the air she raised her arms to protect her head: May I comb your hair? She huddled under the table: May I comb your hair? (27)¹⁶

This overwhelming desire to experience a maternal bond will be echoed by Helene's own son Peter when she becomes a mother. Despite Helene's coldness towards her son, he refuses to accept the distance between them, clinging to his mother determinedly (which

causes anger in Helene, just as her clinging provoked anger in Selma). In the novel's prologue, narrated from Peter's point of view, Helene abandons her son at a train station in the final days of World War II. She tells him to wait with their suitcase, that she is going to look for tickets and maybe food. Peter wants to go with her: "[H]e'd help his mother look for them, he wanted to help her anyway. He opened his mouth, but she was determined to have her own way, she turned and plunged into the crowd" (21).

Franck's text is fascinating, not only because Helene reproduces her mother's behavior towards her in her own behavior towards her son, but because these horrific, seemingly unnatural mothers (unnatural in their rejection of their children) are represented as rich and complex characters. Far from a one-dimensional monster, Selma serves as a critique of women whose existence is based solely on their children: "Every child she had lost after the birth of Martha had seemed to her a demand for her life to end" (58). Certainly, she experiences little reason for living and feels no connection towards her surviving daughters. Yet she is not as selfless as some other mothers in the novel (such as Carl's mother, discussed below), in the sense that she is not without self. There is some indication throughout the novel that Selma takes pleasure in small things and has a kind of inner life that is perhaps beyond the comprehension of those around her. She collects objects and then stores them, for reasons unknown to the rest of her family: buttons and coins, an old shoe, a ceramic fragment polished smooth, and the wings of dead birds. Mysterious as her inner life is, it nonetheless provides Selma with another dimension to her character, as does her intense spirituality. Ostracized within the town because she is Jewish, she is still comforted and guided by her beliefs. She seems to regard her found objects with an almost spiritual reverence. One would not refer to Selma as a happy woman, but she does find comfort and satisfaction in these two aspects of her non-maternal life.

By contrast, the mother of Helene's deceased lover Carl—who is referred to almost exclusively as "Carl's Mutter," or Carl's mother, in the text—is unable to speak or think of anything other than her grief for her son. She meets Helene for the first time after Carl's death and receives her on the veranda, where they drink tea surrounded by the almost unnaturally large and beautiful flowers in the garden.

Just as the surroundings connect Carl's mother to a sense of nature and fertility, so, too, does the conversation surround her with an air of the maternal. She is kind, but her interest in Helene is connected only to her son:

You are young, your life is ahead of you [she tells Helene]. . . . You will find a man who will love you and marry you. Beautiful as you are, and so clever. Helene knew that what Carl's mother was foretelling, to comfort them both, was wrong. She was saying it, yes, but her words hinted at a subtle distinction: Helene could look for another man, she would find one, nothing easier. But no one can look for another son. (285)

In this short statement, Carl's mother clearly differentiates between her grief as a mother and Helene's grief as a fiancée and claims to suffer the greater loss. This also makes clear that her identity is first and foremost—if not exclusively—that of Carl's mother. The reader has no reason, either from this scene or from the rest of the novel, to think that Carl's mother has any other interests or concerns. This, coupled with the almost unreal maternal warmth in this scene, makes her into a caricature of a mother, what readers might think of as an ideal of motherhood, but which is shown here to be flat or sadly empty.

Throughout her life, Helene's identity is largely dependent on the expectations of others, and she finds that her ambitions are hindered by a destiny that is restricted and marked by her female identity: as a child, she exhausts the knowledge of her school teacher but is not allowed to study further; as a teenager, she is forced into caring for her mad mother and the household; as a woman, she wishes to study medicine but works at a pharmacy instead, due to financial limitations; and as a wife and expectant mother, she desires to work as a nurse (for which she has trained) but cannot do so without her husband's permission. It is her intellect and her ambition, perhaps, that prevent her from performing femininity as society expects her to; women such as her Aunt Fanny, wearing slinky dresses and followed by a string of lovers, and women such as Carl's mother, epitomizing the domestic ideal, both outperform her. In fact, once Helene marries her husband Wilhelm, the father of her child, Wilhelm must instruct Helene on how to behave: "And Helene wasn't to work; Wilhelm gave her house-keeping money, she did the shop-

ping and put the bill on the table for him to see; she cooked, she washed and ironed clothes, she lit the stove" (327). Wilhelm likes the idea of having a wife (he begins to refer to Helene as his *Heimchen*, or little housewife (*Die Mittagsfrau* 334)), but he must tell her what that means.¹⁷

As Helene learns how to perform the identity of wife, she simultaneously ceases to perform other identities she had adopted in the past: daughter, sister, and lover. After Carl's death, Helene seems to have no identity at all, and the only role that appeals to her is that of nurse, which provides her with distraction from her loss and some degree of anonymity (all nurses are called *Schwester*, meaning sister or nurse, and wear the same uniform). When she marries Wilhelm (in the late 1930s), he procures false papers for her that hide her Jewish heritage, and she adopts a completely new identity: that of Frau Alice Sehmisch. Consequently, she effectively loses her sister Martha and friend Leontine, who have to correspond with Helene under pseudonyms, and who can only correspond with increasing difficulty as the war progresses. During this time, Helene also learns that her mother has died, further severing the ties between the identities of Helene and Alice. Isolated in her house (as Wilhelm's wife), she speaks only with shop clerks, and silence increasingly becomes her only option, as she must withhold any incriminating personal information from those around her, including her son. As in *Himmelskörper* and *Die Gunnar-Lennefsen-Expedition*, women are the keepers of family history, and story-telling functions to keep family connections alive. For Helene, intimacy is bound with the ability to speak; when she is forced into silence, emotional bonds break down. Thus her emotional rejection of Peter is related to the different identities that Helene must perform—or not perform. Peter only knows about his mother what he can see, so he knows nothing of her other identities, none of which she performs in his presence.

What Franck demonstrates in her novel is that, just as her characters perform a variety of identities, so too do they perform mother. Butler argues that anyone who identifies as female is aspiring to perform a femininity for which there is no original. Women who have given birth to children aspire or are pressured to meet expectations of motherhood, which is also a copy of a copy of a copy. That Helene fails as a mother has more to do with the reader's expectations

of motherhood than with her inability to care for her child. Outwardly she does what a mother is supposed to do: feed and clothe him, tuck him in at night, talk to him, and do things with him. Yet, even before Helene abandons Peter, the reader has criticized if not condemned her mothering. Consider, for example, this interaction: when a stranger on a bus compliments Helene on her son, she not only does not experience pleasure, but she avoids the conversation altogether. The woman says to her that she should be proud of herself, but “Helene did not feel proud. Why should she feel proud of having a child? Peter did not belong to her, she had given birth to him but he was not her property, not her own great achievement” (379). Helene’s response here sharply contradicts popular expectations of motherhood. More importantly, it illuminates the disparity between being a mother and performing motherhood. It becomes clear that Helene is not doing motherhood convincingly.

This is where drag comes in. Butler writes: “If one thinks that one sees a man dressed as a woman or a woman dressed as a man, then one takes the first term of each of those perceptions as the ‘reality’ of gender: the gender that is introduced through the simile lacks ‘reality,’ and is taken to constitute an illusory appearance” (xxiii). In other words, just as male clothing on a woman is identified as out of place, so maternity seems incorrect on someone who does not fit expectations of the maternal. Furthermore, the disconnect produced in this conflict between the reality and the simile highlights the performative quality of reality. Drag simultaneously depends on and challenges certain assumptions, namely, what is feminine and what is masculine. Franck constructs motherhood so that it functions in a similar way: at the same time that it relies on general expectations of mothering (e.g., in order to identify Helene as a bad mother), it undermines the very assumptions upon which the judgments of good and bad mothering are based. The question posed by Franck is not what is a good mother or what is a bad mother (which depends on an identity as socially-constructed as male or female). Instead, the question is, how is the maternal performed?

“Es ist immer Vorsicht geboten, wenn jemand behauptet, die Mutter hatte eine fundamental andere Elternrolle als der Vater, nur weil sie gebären und stillen kann” ‘Caution is always advised when someone claims that the mother held a fundamentally different

role than the father, only because she can give birth and breast feed' claim the new feminist authors Meredith Haaf, Susanne Klingner, and Barbara Streidl (165-66). Yet of the three books I discuss in this article, only Franck's *Die Mittagsfrau* supports this assertion. *Himmelskörper* suggests that daughters will continue to critique their mothers and their mothering, but the novel stops short of offering a new view of motherhood. In attacking patriarchy and the way that it controls or restricts marriage and motherhood, *Die Gunnar-Lennefsen-Expedition* nonetheless supports a view of the maternal that is strongly connected to bodies. *Die Mittagsfrau*, on the other hand, uncloaks the identity mother as one that is performative. In other words, it is not connected to the female body nor to femininity per se but is a performative role like any other. Just as we do our gender identities, so, too, do we perform mother.

What does this mean, then, for motherhood today? Much of the media discussion surrounding feminism and declining birth rates relies on a common understanding of mother, just as it relies on the gender opposites masculine and feminine (and, thus, father and mother). If we are going to complicate this gender binary, perhaps even dismantle it as Butler has done, then it follows that mother is an identity that needs redefinition as well. The most striking and obvious change is that mother need no longer apply to adult women who have given birth to a child. In effect, this means that anyone could perform the maternal, including men. This echoes the concerns of Chodorow and others who first undertook the project of proving that motherhood is socially constructed and who called for an increase in parenting (rather than simply mothering). The model of caretaking that we see in Franck's work is not entirely in line with this conclusion. It is not, for one thing, gender neutral. In *Die Mittagsfrau*, as in the other two texts I discussed here, the fathers play a very different role than the mothers (they are largely absent), and Franck's novel, as concerned as it is with performativity, destabilizes but never abandons the gender binary. Yet the very constructedness of parental identities, as represented by Franck, can be liberating: once they are recognized as constructs, it is possible to deconstruct and reconstruct them. The institution of motherhood, against which society judges and condemns women (those with children and those without children) and which excludes others

(such as fathers or non-biological parents) from membership, must be dismantled. This would allow flexibility in identity construction within the roles of both the caretaker and the taken-care-of.

Notes

1 I would like to thank Hester Baer and Florence Feiereisen for thoughtful and helpful editing of my article. Except where otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

2 Currently parents are allowed a total of 14 months *Elternzeit*, but only if both parents take some time off. That is, the mother of a child may take up to twelve months leave, but the father must take the remaining two. This new measure was taken to encourage both parents to engage actively in parenting. According to statistics, however, only 10.7% of the applications for parental leave in 2007 were filed by men. As low as this number is, it still represents a dramatic increase from 1.5% in 2001. For more statistics, see Haaf, Klingner, and Streidl 174.

3 Whether the ability to combine a family with a career can be statistically proven is debatable, but it is noteworthy that both France and Sweden, countries often referred to by the German media for having excellent childcare systems, have higher birthrates than Germany. In France, the birthrate in 2006 was 1.89 children per woman and, in Sweden, 1.71 children per woman. The German birthrate was 1.34, still higher than Spain's (1.30), Italy's (1.29), and those of Poland (1.22) and Ukraine (1.17). See also Beck-Gernsheim 11.

4 See Sichtermann for the answer of an *Altfeministin*.

5 See, for example, Freud, "Female Sexuality" and "Some Psychical Consequences."

6 De Marneffe points out that the political necessity of proving the social constructedness of motherhood overshadowed considerations of women who choose and desire to mother (63). Chodorow herself, in the "Preface to the Second Edition," points out her tendency to generalize beyond white, Western culture "in a period when many feminists wanted to document the universality of gender and male dominance as important objects of study (and politics)..." (xi).

7 Chodorow freely admits this in the "Preface to the Second Edition" (xv).

8 See, for example, the work of feminist psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin.

9 Katrin Sieg, for example, extends the idea of performance to encompass racial or ethnic identities.

10 See for example Ganeva, Gerstenberger, Littler, and Schaumann.

11 This is not true of Freia's partner, Christian, who is present at their daughter Aino's birth. There is a sense that, by negotiating a new familial constellation, subsequent generations will begin to create change.

12 Note that the German word *Geschichte* means both history and story, underscoring the connection between the family, story-telling, and the child's personal history.

13 For a detailed comparison of *Die Gunnar-Lennefsen-Expedition* and *The Tin Drum*, see Graves 201-02. For more on the connection with Morgner, see Eigler; Marven.

14 See, for example, Silvia Bovenschen.

15 See Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*.

16 Anthea Bell's English translation of *Die Mittagsfrau* was recently published in the United Kingdom as *The Blind Side of the Heart*. All quotations are from the English translation of the text, unless otherwise noted.

17 Wilhelm also expects his wife to be a virgin. When he learns that Helene is sexually experienced, he is shocked and repulsed and compares her to an animal. No longer a woman in his mind, barely—only legally—his wife, Helene becomes for Wilhelm a whore.

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