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**Creating a German Sense of Queerness?  
Transatlantic reception of queer theories and queer music festivals in Post-Wende Germany**

For a little more than five years now, I have spent considerable time traveling across Germany to attend to various queer and feminist music festivals. At first, they were only communal spaces I visited as both a queer young woman and a strong fan of hardcore punk music. But two years ago, I also started studying them as fieldwork for my PhD dissertation. Since 2014, I have attended events such as the Lady\*Fest Mannheim, Germany, the Lady\*Fest Saarbrücken, Germany, the Noc Walpurgii in Berlin, Germany, the Lady\*Fest Karlsruhe, Germany, or the Böse & Gemein Festival in Dresden, Germany.

Along my experiences, I have noticed that the arrangement of queer DIY music festivals in Germany always follow a similar pattern: music gigs and parties by night and workshops and debates during the day. These events are indeed inspired by American models of events, created by the punk movements of the Riot Grrrls and Queercore in the 1990s. The ways in which organizers divide the schedule ensures that their events work towards the development of interdisciplinary queer-feminism. Not only does this reflect transnational influences from the US but further highlights the intersection of pop culture and politics.

Drawing upon ethnography and the analyze of the archives of more than 100 festivals organized in Germany between 2003 and 2018, in this presentation, I will focus on the reception of “queer theories” in Germany through the lens of music and the festival scene. I will argue that queerness isn’t solely the development of an American culture. Instead, its concept have circulated and evolved globally. I will therefore demonstrate how German queer music festivals shape new linguistic forms, and how this process impacts the events’ vibe. Finally, I will argue that queer

theories and identities also have a repercussion on songwriting, through the case-study of the song “Frauen mit Sternchen” performed by the rapper Sookee.

## 1. Queer theories and language in Post-Wende Germany

According to queer theories, gender isn't natural, rather it is performed. It is coded (and decoded) in our bodies, behaviors, clothes, etc. And, queer movements rely on a strong critique of gender and sexual binaries (that is, the opposition of masculinity and femininity). They aim to blur the line between men and women by performing untraditional, and thus non-binary, gender identities.

Yet, language is also part of what shapes gender. Queer theories, as they develop a critical approach of gender, have therefore a strong impact on the way we write and speak. Deconstructing gender norms necessarily leads to deconstruct linguistic norms.

The following example of new, queer, inclusive linguistic gender norms are taken out of academic resources, but are quite similar to what you could find in subcultural scenes. A document released by the Universität zu Köln for example states :

“The well-established gender system is based on the existence of two clearly identifiable genders, namely men and women. It is thus binary. (...) Current research on intersex and transsexuality shows that this bipolar system is not sustainable: nowadays, a large number of sexual identities appeared. (...) How can the entire spectrum of genders be represented linguistically?

Possibilities include the gender gap “\_” and the gender asterisk “\*”.”

Gender-Gap or Unterstrich and Gender-Sternchen are quite similar, yet they also have specific characteristics:

“Gender Gap The gender gap can be traced back to Steffen Herrmann, who advocated for a linguistic representation of all genders in his article "Performing the Gap - Queer Figures and Sexual Appropriation" (2003). (...)

Gender asterisk The asterisk is another form of linguistic representation beyond the binary system. (...)

Critics of the gender gap think it portrays the identities beyond the binary matrix as a "blank space" and thus denies their existence. Advocates of the gender gap see in the gap a space for the development of new identities, as in an emancipatory symbol.”

We find both of these characters in the names of several queer DIY music festivals. For instance, the second edition of the Ladyfest Köln was renamed for “\_fest”. One of the organizers wrote, accordingly to what we have just seen:

“\_fest (advancing the ideas of ladyfest: play gender 2008)

... To keep up the illusion of two clearly separated genders our (German) language only knows the two articles “she” and “he”, as well as the related two endings [...]. Everything that is located outside this system is constantly being denied. In contrast to this, I want to position a different space for sexuality, a space that is to be explored and that we should fight for, the space looks like this: \_ This is certainly not only about opening up spaces for intersexual people, meaning people with two sexual characteristics..., because with the set mark \_ a political space for resistive actions, which does not set requirements is created...’ (Steffen Kitty Herrmann)”

## 2. A queer atmosphere

Now, imagine we're Saturday morning. After a short walk in the city of Heidelberg, you finally arrive in front of the Breidenbach Studios, where the sixth edition of the local Lady\*Fest festival is going to take place the whole day long. In front of the venue, people have hung a rainbow flag. Not long after you entered, someone hands you a pen and a piece of adhesive paper. The person said something like "Wir machen Namen und Pronomen Tag". Now, if you're completely new in the scene, you might not know what that is and stay stupefied by that practice. What should you write on that paper? Yet, after years of activity in the queer\_feminist DIY scene, you might know what all this is about. After all, you remember that, a year ago, during another festival in Berlin, one of your informants told you that no one ever asked for her pronouns outside of a queer\_feminist punk event. As you remind this anecdote, you write your chosen names and pronouns on the adhesive paper and stick it on the top of your shirt. That's at least what I did, and wrote "Louise, Sie".

During the breakfast and the following workshops, I sometimes glanced at the other attendees name and pronoun tags. Most of them display the classic feminine or masculine German pronouns, "Sie" or "Er". Sometimes, though, I can read the uncanny "Sie\_Er", "Sie\*Er", "Es" or even "Xie".

During the rest of the day, every single person who entered the venue was, soon or later, asked to display their names and pronouns on a similar adhesive paper.

While uncanny for any newcomer or outsider of the scene, asking the attendees to display and even invent pronouns of their choice, helps the festivals shape a queer environment and ambience.

While the festivals let the attendants introduce themselves with whatever pronouns and names they chose, the events thus authorize a distinction between physical appearance and chosen gender identity. Neutral pronouns – that is, pronouns that are neither completely feminine nor completely masculine – transcend the traditional expectations of gender binary. People presenting as feminine

might as well reclaim masculine names and pronouns (and vice versa), while some people create new pronouns, drawing on the basis of masculine and feminine pronouns, plus “Sternche” or “Unterstrich”. Others reclaim the traditional German neutral pronoun, and finally a last category of people create pronouns out of (almost) nothing. All these possibilities make the attendees able to shape and perform their identities outside of binary gender norms.

Yet, this is also made possible through a large range of workshops.

“Outside the box – a theoretical and practical approach to fluid gender identities

In opposition to what is usually assumed, most sciences aren’t so sure anymore about the permanent and binary character of sex. More and more research results are telling us what so many people have known for years: sex, gender, desire, identity in general are fluid! This workshop is divided in two parts: the first one is about confronting common assumptions with all the arguments that are out there and that show us how sex is constructed. (...)

In the second part, we will try on new gender identities – in a literal sense! Equipped with binders, glue, bras, packers and other performance accessories, we will try to discover, rediscover or investigate other parts of our identity. This is not about wearing a costume nor is it about substituting one of the predetermined performances for the other: the aim is to enlarge our own possibilities.” (Ladyfest Berlin 2013)

Relying on such workshops, queer feminist DIY music festivals encourage everybody to experiment with their own gender identity; a process that is hardly possible in their daily life (at their jobs, in school, etc.). Indeed, festivals are known to provide a space that cuts their attendees from their daily lives, hence their possibility to subvert the social order as suggested by festival studies that draw on Bakhtin’s “carnavalesque”. The rules that regulate the social space of the queer\_feminist music festival are therefore different than the rules that regulate the social space of each attendee’s daily

life. Practices such as name and pronoun tags and “fluid gender identities” workshops therefore provide the attendees a way to perform and embody identities hidden behind typographical signs as the “Unterstrich” (gap) and the “Sternchen” (little stars). Queer music festivals provide singular spaces where these gender identities are, for once, fluid and chosen by the festivals’ attendees, and not socially determined and fixed.

### **3. Queerness in songs**

Moreover, queerness and queer identities also shape songs and songwriting.

The rapper Sookee is one of the most programmed artists in the German DIY queer feminist music festivals scene. In her piece “Frauen mit Sternchen”, she lists a wide range of queer identities. This song is thus a typical example of what I would like to demonstrate.

First thing: the title should remind us what we saw earlier about the “Sternchen”. Behind those “Sternchen” lay all the identities mentioned in the song text.

Throughout the text, we notice both English and German terms.

English terms include for example Bitches, Butches, Femmes, Quings, Queers, Riot Grrrls, Tomboys.

German terms include Denker\*Innen, Blaustrümpfe, König\*Innen, Tribaden, Amazonen

Blending two languages (English, German) is part of the construction of a queer vocabulary that is shaped by international circulation of concepts as well as by their local reception and modeling.

Plus, queer theories, as they are understood in queer DIY music festivals, aren’t only dealing with the presentation of self, but also with the way artists write music. Songs experiment with gender as much as attendees of the festivals did during the workshops I analyzed earlier. The song texts help creating a sense of queerness. The rapper addresses her music to a specific public that is widely described within the lyrics. The text highlights identities that are generally marginalized within music scenes. It bespeaks of the circulation of English terms for queer identities within a German-

speaking scene (“Butches”, “Tomboys”), and, at the same time, underpins the history of German queer or feminist movements (“Blaustrümpfe”). The song contributes to an acknowledgement of the co-construction of the queer German movements, between American and local influences.

## **Conclusion**

This presentation drew on queer studies as well as critical events studies and popular music studies. I aimed to show that, the queer vibe of the festivals is shaped by language, self-presentation techniques, workshops and musical contents. Queer, non-binary identities are therefore chosen, claimed and performed by the audience but also by the artists on stage. That sense of queerness crosses language (through pronouns or names of gender identities, as listed in Sookee’s lyrics), corporealities (through gender experimentation workshop), and social practices (name and pronoun labels).

Moreover, all of the characteristics of queerness I have analyzed are marked by both an appropriation of terms and behaviors inspired by the queer English-speaking world and the creation of a queer German language.