“*Berlin, du deutsche deutsche Frau*” Berlin as a Woman in Twentieth-Century German Poetry

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Abstract

This article examines the feminization of Berlin in twentieth-century German poetry, exploring how gendered personifications of the city negotiate historical change and emotional attachment. While Berlin's literary representations have received extensive critical attention, their gendered dimensions remain under–explored. Through close readings of Gertrud Kolmar's Wappen von Berlin (1927/28), Hildegard Knef's "Berlin, dein Gesicht hat Sommersprossen" (1966), and Wolf Biermann's Berlin, du deutsche deutsche Frau (1962) and Mein Kiez (1998), the analysis demonstrates that feminization serves as a recurring but historically adaptable strategy through which writers articulate the city's conflicting identities as maternal, domestic, eroticized, or violated. Spanning the Weimar period, postwar reconstruction, and Cold War division, these texts reveal how Berlin's poetic imagination binds urban history to gendered embodiment and translates political upheaval and social transformation into affective experience.

Throughout the twentieth century, Berlin has served as both a backdrop and a protagonist in German literature.1 Prose texts such as "Berlin Alexanderplatz" by Alfred Döblin, "Das kunstseidene Mädchen" by Irmgard Keun, "Fabian. Die Geschichte eines Moralisten" by Erich Kästner, and "Wir Kinder vom Bahnhof Zoo" by Christiane Felscherinow portray the city in its shifting political and social registers. Poetry, too, has long engaged with Berlin, particularly in the early twentieth-century genre of *Großstadtlyrik*, or metropolitan poetry, as seen in Morgenstern's "Berlin", Heym's "Berlin I/II/III", and Boldt's "Auf der Terrasse des Café Josty". Each of these texts emphasizes different aspects of Berlin: "*as a centre of prosperity, as the birthplace of Modernism, as the home of a knowledge society and, at the same time, as a dark location in the political history of Europe*" (Berendse 2017, 246). Yet beyond these shifting depictions, Berlin's literary presence also emerges as a gendered figure, a motif that this article examines across twentieth-century poetry.

In recent scholarship on the literary representation of Berlin in the twentieth century, the human dimension of the city has emerged as one central focus that is also highlighted in Katharina Gerstenberger's study *Writing the New Berlin* (2008). One key aspect she identifies is the portrayal of Berlin as an erotic site. Within this thematic lens, she describes a development across the century. In literature of the Weimar period (1920s–30s), Berlin is frequently associated with sex work, which serves as a motif for the commodification of desire and the moral anxieties of the modern metropolis (Gerstenberger 2008, 26). In the 1960s, literary representations diverge along the lines of divided Germany: East German literature often stages romantic relationships across ideological boundaries, while West German texts imagine Berlin as a space of "*political and sexual utopia*" (Gerstenberger, 2008, 26). In the 1990s, following reunification, the city continues to be associated with eroticism, but now functions as a symbolic landscape through which to process historical rupture. Gerstenberger notes that these post-wall texts frequently employ "*sexual imagery*" (2008, 27) to negotiate the aftermath of division and the complexities of national transformation. However, Berlin remains a site in which characters engage in intimate or erotic relationships; a background to human experience. Gerstenberger also addresses how the city itself is imagined through bodily metaphors. She points to figurative language such as "*traffic arteries*" and "*green lungs*" (2008, 53) as examples of how the urban landscape is mapped onto the human body. This corporeal framing becomes particularly charged in post-unification literature, where representations of the deformed or fragmented body often serve as metaphors for the city's own ruptured past. In this context, Berlin is described as "*an 'extraordinary' urban body with*

a norm-defying history" (ibid., 55). Building on Gerstenberger's reading of Berlin as an erotic site, this study shifts the focus from eroticism itself to its gendered configurations, asking how feminized personifications of the city articulate political and emotional meaning across historical contexts.

In his chapter "Twentieth-Century Poetry," Gerrit-Jan Berendse identifies the themes of "*war, death and destruction*" as "*key ingredients in the history and identity of Berlin*" (2017, 246). He highlights how poets such as Benn, Brecht, Braun, and Müller approach the city through aesthetic strategies that foreground disintegration and loss. These include grotesque corporeality, spectral imagery, intertextual dialogue with the dead, and the destabilization of ideological binaries. By transforming political violence and social change into poetic experience, the poems he analyzes construct what he calls "*alternative histories of Berlin*" (ibid., 247). While Berendse does not use the term himself, his discussion suggests an image of Berlin poetry as a palimpsest of memory and loss.

While the literary representation of Berlin in twentieth-century poetry has been widely studied (see also Arnold 1999; Beutin et al. 2013; Benthien & Gestring 2023; Ishida 2025), the role of gender, particularly the feminized portrayal of the city, remains underexamined. This article addresses that gap by offering a comparative analysis of how feminized personifications of Berlin are constructed across different historical moments and lyrical voices. It examines four texts in chronological order: Kolmar's *Wappen von Berlin* (1927/28), Knef's "Berlin, dein Gesicht hat Sommersprossen" (1962), and Biermann's *Berlin, du deutsche deutsche Frau* (1962) and *Mein Kiez* (1998). This selection unites authors whose ambivalent relationships with Berlin were shaped by distinct political circumstances. Kolmar, born and raised in Berlin, was persecuted and murdered under National Socialism; Knef, who sought artistic opportunities abroad, repeatedly returned to a city marked by postwar reconstruction; and Biermann, who settled in the GDR, was later expelled from it. Their works thus provide complementary yet divergent perspectives on how the feminization of Berlin functions across historical and artistic boundaries. Through close readings, the article explores which traits are attributed to the gendered city, how agency is distributed, and how these representations intersect with memory, politics, and voice. By linking gendered figuration to poetic form and socio-political context, the analysis shows how these portrayals shape cultural understandings of Berlin as an emotional, historical, and ideological space. Ultimately, the article contributes to current debates in German literary studies by tracing how lyrical constructions of the feminized urban space offer relational models of identity and belonging.

Kolmar (1894–1943), born Gertrud Käthe Chodziesner, was a Jewish poet who spent her early life in Berlin and was murdered in Auschwitz in 1943 (Czech 1989). As National Socialist policies increasingly excluded Jewish authors from public life, Kolmar's work remained largely unpublished (Jäger 1998); only three of her collections appeared in print during her lifetime, among them *Wappen von Berlin* [Coat of Arms of Berlin2] which is part of the lyrical cycle *Preußische Wappen* [Prussian Coats of Arms], written in the winter of 1927/28 and published in 1934 (Kolmar 1991). The cycle reflects Kolmar's idiosyncratic engagement with medieval Prussian city emblems, many of which were then circulating as commercial prints on coffee packaging (Schumann 2002). Her work is especially relevant for its deep connection to Berlin and its poetic voice emerging from historical marginalization.

The poem begins with a heraldic description that directly reproduces Berlin's traditional coat of arms: "*In Silber, aufgerichtet, ein schwarzer Bär*" [On silver, a black bear rampant] (Kolmar 1955, 262). This framing initially establishes the *Wappenbär* as an emblematic, static figure. But immediately, the text destabilizes this convention with a personified feminization: the bear begins to speak, and more crucially, becomes a female bear, a "*Bärin*". This shift from symbolic animal to gendered narrator is subtle but profound. By combining animal and human-feminine traits, the poem constructs a hybrid figure that resists both heraldic abstraction and human identification. The feminized bear thus marks Berlin as radically other, a being situated between nature and civilization.

The "*Bärin*" declares: "*Ich habe sie getragen, / Die Stadt in meinem Schoße, Höhlenbrut.*" [I carried her, / The city in my womb, cave-born.]. Here, the city of Berlin is not merely protected or represented by the bear but gestated by her, becoming biologically her offspring. The "*Bärin*" thus claims affective authorship over the city's origins. The term "*Höhlenbrut*" [cave-brood] evokes multiple associations. It may reference the *Höhlenbär* [cave bear], an extinct species linked to hibernation and prehistoric life, situating the city's emergence within a deep natural temporality. At the same time, its phonetic proximity to *Höllenbrut* [brood of hell] introduces a second, more threatening register. In German, *Höllenbrut* refers to demonic offspring, a term often used to describe forces of chaos or moral decay. This resonance subtly shifts the metaphor: Berlin's origin is now also associated with latent danger, suggesting that beneath the surface of maternal care lies the potential for violence or disorder.

But more importantly, *Wappen von Berlin* structures its poetics around a dual figuration of the city: the maternal "*Bärin*" and the cub she carries

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and raises. Berlin is thus not simply feminized but configured through a maternal relation characterized by care and conflict, as will be shown in the analysis. This relational model of femininity extends beyond the mother figure and unfolds through the cub, who allegorically embodies the city's growth. The consistent use of feminine pronouns such as "*ihre Pranke*" [her paw] may reflect the grammatical gender of *die Stadt* but also reinforces the poem's logic of feminization. Kolmar's decision to recast the heraldic bear as a female figure grounds Berlin's emergence in a maternal body, making feminization as a structural condition of how the city enters poetic form.

This gendered figuration of the city deepens as the poem shifts focus from the maternal "*Bärin*" to the cub she raises. From the outset, Berlin is cast not as an abstract idea but as a physical presence. The earlier image of the city carried "*im Schoße*" frames Berlin as a living being shaped through embodied and relational processes. The "*Bärin['s]*" care is expressed through sensory detail: she rocks the cub with a "*tiefen Brummen*" [deep growl] and provides "*Honigwachs*" [honeywax] and "*süßes Kraut*" [sweet herbs]. These images evoke a mode of nurturing grounded in physical sustenance and environmental closeness.

As the cub grows, she begins to act with increasing independence and force. Her paw now "*scherzt mit blanken Schienen*" [plays with shiny rails], and she chases insects across industrial surfaces. Annegret Schumann observes that in these later stanzas, two image worlds overlap: the playful cub becomes inseparable from the expanding city and its encroachment on rural life (Schumann 2002). The gesture of "*scherzen*" [to joke/play] may still suggest innocence, but the poem quickly reveals its violent undertone: "*Sie droht und lockt. Die Forste hallen wider. / Das Singen unterm Bauerndach verstummt*" [She threatens and entices. The forests echo. / The singing beneath the farmhouse roof falls silent]. What has begun as childlike play becomes a metaphor for the city's disruptive expansion and the silencing of its rural surroundings.

In the poem's closing stanza, the focus shifts again to the "*Bärin*", who now reappears as a cosmic figure, standing upright with limbs reaching toward the sky. She moves the "*Wolkenblock, der überm Haupt ihr kracht*" [cloud tower, which crashes above her head], a line that has led to controversial interpretations: while some critics read this action as another act of maternal protection (Woltmann, in Schumann 2002), Schumann argues that it may just as plausibly be read as an act of destruction directed towards the child who has become dangerous, the city that threatens its own environment (Schumann 2002). This ambiguity introduces a deeply

conflicted maternal gesture: is the mother saving her child or punishing it for straying too far from nature?

The final image introduces a visual and symbolic complexity: the snowflakes, "*silbern eisige Gestirne*" [silver icy stars], that melt onto the black fur of the "*Bärin*" suggest not renewal, but dissolution. As Schumann shows, this closing image may be read as a metaphor for self-fragmentation; the maternal *Ich* is both protector and destroyer, bound to the city by origin and endangered by its transformation (Schumann 2002). This double function of care and loss is intimately linked to a poetics of memory. The "*Bärin*" recounts moments of shelter and nurturing: "*Ich habe sie getragen, / Die Stadt in meinem Schoße*", "*Ich wiegte sie*" [I rocked her], "*Ich leerte Honigwachs*" [I poured out honey-wax]. These are acts of remembering, written in past tense. The poem inscribes memory as an embodied, maternal knowledge that evokes a lost intimacy with a now unrecognizable city. The child, Berlin, becomes a projection of civilizational anxiety, both nurtured and threatened by the very forces that made her possible. Kolmar's poem thus stages a double becoming: the "*Bärin*" grows into a cosmic figure, and the young city-bear into a dangerously autonomous force. Feminization here allows Berlin to be imagined not simply as a place, but as a body with a history that ultimately becomes estranged. The poem's urban critique is not built on a binary opposition between nature and civilization, but on their interconnection. Through the overlay of maternal and urban imagery, the poem explores what it means for a city to grow up and for its growth to carry both memory and loss. In doing so, the poem reflects Weimar-era anxieties about the impact of urban growth and modernization, capturing a cultural climate marked by uncertainty about Berlin's rapid transformation into a modern city.

In contrast to Kolmar's metaphorical transformation of Berlin into a she-bear, Knef's well-known song "Berlin, dein Gesicht hat Sommersprossen" (1966) [Berlin, your face has freckles] presents the city as a human figure from the outset. Knef (1925–2002) was a German star who "*managed to transgress societal norms or expectations*" (Bach 2022, 122). Raised in Berlin, she began her career during the war as a graphic designer in UFA's special effects department while taking acting lessons (Bach 2022). She became "*West Germany's first postwar movie star*" with her role in *Die Mörder sind unter uns* (1946) (Bach 2022,115). In the 1960s, Knef reinvented herself as a singer and later as a bestselling author. Her stage presence and lyrical sensibility were closely tied to her identification with West Berlin: "*Like no other German actress* [...] *Knef has captured the imagination of West Berlin, and no other city captured her like Berlin*" (Bach 2022, 123). Her

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song “Berlin, dein Gesicht hat Sommersprossen”, co-written with Charly Niessen in 1966, even reached the top of the charts. Given Knef’s unique status as a cultural figure so closely tied to Berlin, the text of her song is a relevant case for examining the representation of Berlin in poetry of the 20th century.

From the first stanza onward, Berlin is anthropomorphized through visual imagery. Physical features, especially those of the face, are emphasized: “*dein Gesicht hat Sommersprossen*”, “*dein Mund ist viel zu groß*” [your mouth is much too big], “*deine Stirn hat Dackelfalten*” [your forehead has dachshund wrinkles]. These images render the city as a concrete, bodily figure. More importantly, freckles, a large mouth, and facial wrinkles may suggest character, age, or emotional expression, but they do not clearly signal femininity or masculinity. Rather than beginning with an idealized or typified urban figure, the song presents Berlin as a visibly embodied entity marked by irregular features and recognizable physical human traits.

In the third stanza, however, the speaker does introduce a clear gender marker: “*Berlin, du bist die Frau mit der Schürze, an der wir unser Leben lang zieh'n.*” [Berlin, you are the woman with the apron that we tug on all our lives.]. Addressing Berlin as “*Frau mit der Schürze*” marks a decisive shift. Berlin is no longer just a face, but a gendered figure. Yet this feminization is not abstract or allegorical. The image evokes a specific socio-cultural milieu. It links the city to working-class domesticity. In her study of women's clothing published in 2002, Elke Gaugele notes that the apron became symbolically charged as a visual expression of a bourgeois and petty-bourgeois ideal: “*eine Ästhetik der Schlichtheit und Funktionalität insbesondere als Ausdruck von Moral, Fleiß und Tugendhaftigkeit*” [an aesthetic of simplicity and functionality, especially as an expression of morality, diligence, and virtue] (Gaugele 2002, 186f). In this context, the apron functions as a metonym for care work, social reliability, and emotional labor. The feminization of Berlin, then, constructs the city as a sustaining and resilient presence within everyday life. The second half of the line “*an der wir unser Leben lang zieh'n*” further develops this feminization by adding a physical gesture of dependence and familiarity. It is children who mostly tug on a woman’s apron, whether out of affection, need, or habit. Read in this light, the image introduces a maternal dimension to Berlin’s personification. The city becomes a figure to which one remains attached, not through admiration, but through everyday reliance. This gesture evokes affective intimacy and embodied dependence, making the feminized city a site of continuity and security.

In the song, Berlin is not glamorized or stylized; rather, it is framed through persistence and care. This becomes clear in the following lines: "*du bist nicht schön, Berlin, nach Metermaßen, / doch wenn man dich liebt, dann liebt man dich sehr*" [you are not beautiful, Berlin, by yardstick standards / but if one loves you, then one loves you deeply]. Knef's Berlin resists the logic of standardization and aesthetic judgment. The city is loved not despite her flaws, but because of them. This aesthetic of worn familiarity constructs Berlin not as a monumental or heroic figure, but as a lived-in urban subject, one whose value lies in endurance, not exceptionality.

The feminization of the city not only shapes the portrayal of Berlin, but also the affective position of the lyric speaker. The lines "*mein Gemüt kriegt Kinderaugen*" [my spirit gets children's eyes] and "*mein Puls geht viel zu schnell*" [my pulse beats far too fast] signal a physiological reaction. The city is not reflected upon from a distance but felt with the body. Through Berlin, the speaker experiences a form of emotional regression or a state of childlike perception. The feminization of Berlin thus enables a poetic logic of affective re-subjectification: the speaker becomes someone else in relation to the city.

While Knef's feminization avoids eroticization and resists masculinist tropes, it remains bound to a traditional model of femininity. As Michaela Kuhnhenne has shown in her study of postwar gender norms, women's roles in mid-century Germany were often determined by essentialist conceptions of gender. Emotionality, care, and self-sacrifice were seen as inherently feminine, while rationality and productivity were coded as masculine (Kuhnhenne 2005). In this light, the figure of the woman with the apron can be read as a poetic extension of postwar gender ideology: Berlin as a reliable and modest maternal figure whose value lies in being there for others. This complexity is heightened in the final lines of the song, where the speaker says: "*nimmst du mich voller Selbstvertrauen / an dein verknautschtes Bärenfell*" [you draw me with full confidence / against your crumpled bear fur]. The image of Berlin's "*Bärenfell*" reintroduces the heraldic symbol of the city, linking Knef's song back to Kolmar's she-bear figure. Here, the personified Berlin is rendered as both woman and bear, combining human tenderness with animal rawness.

Both Kolmar and Knef employ maternal imagery to construct a feminized Berlin, yet they do so in markedly different ways. Kolmar's "*Bärin*" is not a figure of unconditional nurture but one of ambivalent authority. While she gives life and watches over the city's development, her relation to the Berlin cub also contains the threat of destruction, suggesting a maternal force that protects by delimiting or even extinguishing. Knef's portrayal,

by contrast, draws on a softer domestic register. The image of "*die Frau mit der Schürze*" and the gesture of tugging at the apron evoke emotional labor and everyday attachment, hinting at a maternal role grounded in care and reliability. This reading is further supported by the speaker's childlike response to the city, which casts Berlin as an anchor of affective security. In both lyrical texts, maternal personification plays a central role, yet its emotional and narrative functions diverge significantly.

Born in Hamburg to Jewish communist parents, Biermann moved to the GDR in 1953 to attend a socialist boarding school (Biermann 2017). His father, an anti-fascist resistance fighter, had been murdered in Auschwitz (Steding 2023). While Biermann remained a committed socialist, his growing criticism of the GDR dictatorship and its distortion of socialist ideals led to severe censorship. As early as 1963, his performances were banned, and by 1965 he was officially prohibited from publishing or performing in the GDR (Biermann 2017). His songs and poems nonetheless circulated widely in West Germany, where he gained popularity among leftist audiences. In 1976, while on a concert tour in the West, Biermann was stripped of his GDR citizenship and forced into exile (Steding 2023). Therefore, his position as a voluntary East German citizen who was ultimately expelled grants his work a complex perspective on both East and West Berlin.

Biermann's poem Berlin, du deutsche deutsche Frau (1962) [Berlin, you German German woman], also released as a song, opens his poem collection of the same title published in 2008, a work that engages directly with the political and emotional fault lines of postwar Berlin. In the collection's preface, Biermann describes Berlin not as a city in a geographical sense but as a shifting poetic object. While Biermann, like Knef, configures Berlin as a female human figure, his portrayal diverges from the maternal relationships evoked by Kolmar and Knef. Instead, he casts the city in the role of a romantic partner:

"Berlin ist nun mal meine erste Liebe seit 1955," he writes in the preface, "und die Stadt wurde meine alte Liebe, weil ich mich immer wieder neu in sie verliebt habe. Ach! solch eine kapriziöse Dauergeliebte muss der Poet bei mancher Gelegenheit neu besingen, verdichten und im Streit auch zerdichten" (Biermann 2008, 9).

[Berlin has always been my first love since 1955 and the city became my old love because I kept falling in love with her all over again. Ah! such a capricious lifelong lover the poet must sing of anew, turn into poetry, and at times also dismantle through poetry.]

Biermann thus frames lyric writing as both an act of attachment and resistance. The verb besingen, translated here as "to sing of," does more than denote poetic description. It evokes the lyrical mode of praise, and carries connotations of 'Minnesang', the medieval tradition of courtly love poetry in which the poet sings to a distant, idealized noble beloved. But even though the speaker's relationship to Berlin is initially framed within that register of admiration, the poem itself sharply diverges from such expectations. Rather than offering a poetic homage, it constructs a relationship marked by tension and contradiction. What begins as a gesture of intimacy becomes a site of unresolved conflict, where poetic language no longer idealizes but rather questions the very possibility of lyrical praise.

The title of the poem itself establishes the foundation for a complex and conflicted relationship between the lyric subject and the city by employing feminized personification. Yet this is not done by attributing character traits to the city; rather, Berlin is anthropomorphized relationally. The city is addressed as a "*du*", a second-person personal pronoun that places it in a dialogic position and gives the impression of intimacy and immediacy. However, Berlin does not respond. She is not granted agency but instead becomes a silent counterpart in a lyrical monologue that displays the speaker's projections: desire, frustration, and ultimately dependence.

The doubling of the adjective "*deutsche deutsche Frau*" (ibid, 11) is a subtle indicator of Berlin's fragmented identity. The absence of a comma between the two adjectives suggests not emphasis but internal division. On a political and historical level, the phrase condenses Berlin's unique position during the Cold War: a city claimed simultaneously by the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the German Democratic Republic (GDR). The doubled "*deutsche*" signals a compound national identity and conflicting ideological affiliations, pointing to the tensions embedded within the German state itself. This linguistic doubling functions as a compressed metaphor for the Cold War condition of Berlin: not simply two halves of one whole, but two versions of Germanness colliding in a single urban space.

While the poem anticipates the reader's expectation of affectionate expression, it systematically undermines it. Rather than celebrating Berlin's beauty, the speaker catalogs her physical shortcomings: "*Ach, deine Hände sind so rauh*" [oh, your hands are so rough], "*Ach, deine Hüften sind so schmal*" [oh, your hips are so narrow], "*Ach, deine Küsse sind so schal*" [oh, your kisses are so bland]. These descriptions, introduced by exclamations, would typically serve to heighten emotional intensity. Yet here, they signal rejection rather than admiration. The choice of adjectives - rough, narrow, bland - conveys physical unattractiveness, even repulsion. Berlin is neither

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idealized nor eroticized. This inversion of idealizing conventions can already be found in Renaissance love poetry, for instance in Shakespeare's *Sonnet 130*, and belongs to the (anti-)Petrarchan tradition. As Heather Dubrow points out, Petrarchism and its counter-discourses are not merely about love but also about power and politics (Dubrow 2018,10). Biermann's poem reactivates this intersection, transforming the rhetoric of desire into a critique of social and political disillusionment. The text thus not only mocks the traditional poetic mode of *besingen* but turns that mode into a vehicle of social and emotional critique. What emerges is a parody of love poetry, and by extension, a critique of Berlin itself.

This emotional dissonance is mirrored structurally and thematically through a pattern of Berlin as a place of contrasts: wide streets and narrow hips (Biermann 2008, 11), ice and fire (ibid), and consequently desire and rejection. Despite the consistent criticism and lack of romantic idealization, the speaker ultimately confesses: "*Ich kann nicht weg mehr von dir gehn*" [I can't leave you anymore]. This declaration demonstrates the poem's central paradox. Berlin, though unattractive and estranged, retains an emotional hold on the speaker. At the same time, the statement resonates literally in the historical context of 1962, when the recently erected Berlin Wall rendered physical departure impossible. Biermann thus stages attachment as both emotional dependency and material constraint, fusing personal and political captivity.

One phrase in particular captures this dynamic: the speaker calls himself a "*kühler Freier*" [a cool suitor]. This oxymoron gestures toward emotional detachment within the rhetorical framework of love. The "*Freier*" suggests someone who courts, but the adjective "*kühl*" implies distance, perhaps even bitterness. The speaker enacts a role that is conventionally associated with longing but empties it of warmth. This friction between emotional posture and emotional content is mirrored in the poem's language itself, which oscillates between lyrical intensity and blunt dismissal.

Ultimately, the feminized personification of Berlin in Biermann's poem has a critical function: it allows the speaker to address the city as an intimate counterpart shaped by historical and emotional forces. This move draws on a long literary tradition of feminizing nations such as Marianne as the symbol of the French Republic, or Germania in nineteenth-century German nationalist iconography. In Biermann's version, however, the feminized city is neither glorified nor romanticized. Similar to Knef's portrait, Berlin is portrayed as worn down and unattractive, yet she remains emotionally charged. The gendered framing introduces a dynamic of uneven intimacy: the city is addressed, criticized, even desired, but she has no

voice of her own. This asymmetry reflects both the speaker's conflicted attachment and the broader tensions of Cold War Berlin, a city caught between ideologies and identities. Through the figure of the "*deutsche deutsche Frau*," Biermann captures Berlin as a site of divided belonging and unresolved emotional ties.

In contrast to the feminization of Berlin as a "*deutsche deutsche Frau*," Biermann's poem *Mein Kiez* [My Neighborhood] constructs the city in relation to a specific historical moment. Although published in 1998, the poem retrospectively situates its first stanza in the immediate postwar period, during the Allied occupation. This historical setting is not described from a distance but rendered through the intensity of poetic language. The first stanza opens with a fourfold invocation: "*Berlin Berlin Berlin Berlin*" (Biermann 2008, 94). This repetition of Berlin reflects the postwar division of the city among the four Allied powers: Soviet, American, British, and French. Each "*Berlin*" functions as a synecdoche for a sector, underscoring the geographical fraction of the city as well as its identity shaped by occupying forces.

Contrary to Berlin as "*deutsche deutsche Frau*", the terms of Berlin's gendering have shifted drastically. In Biermann's earlier poem, Berlin is addressed by a "*Hochzeitsfreier*", a suitor seeking her hand in marriage. The "*Freier*" is the lyric speaker himself, who approaches the city. In *Mein Kiez*, by contrast, the same term returns in its other sense: "*Freier*" as the client of a prostitute. This time, Berlin is not courted but labeled "*das Hitlerflittchen*" [Hitler's tart] and sexually assaulted by the four Allied powers who occupy the city. In this context, the term "*Hitlerflittchen*" operates as a provocative neologism that fuses two contrasting registers: political association and sexualized degradation. The word *Flittchen* is a derogatory term for a promiscuous woman, suggesting moral looseness and social disgrace. In this compound with the reference to Hitler, the term positions Berlin as a woman who had entered into a disreputable relationship, thus implicating the city in the ideological and moral corruption that enabled the atrocities of the Nazi regime. The formulation does not suggest active political agency, but rather a tainted intimacy; Berlin as a city seduced by or willingly complicit in fascism. This configuration echoes broader cultural metaphorizations of German history. In *Das Sexuelle in der deutsch-deutschen Vereinigung* (1991), Konrad Weller uses a similarly gendered and sexualized metaphor to describe reunification: "*die Braut, einst DDR-Volk geheissen*," is "*ein bisschen verführt, ein bisschen gewaltsam in Besitz genommen*" [the bride, once called the GDR people, is somewhat seduced, somewhat violently taken possession of] (Weller 1991, 8). He describes their relationship as "*halb zog er sie, halb sank sie hin*" [half he pulled her, half she sank down], which conveys a dynamic of reluctant

submission and ambiguous complicity (ibid.). While not referring to Berlin directly, Weller's image highlights how national transformation is repeatedly cast in terms of feminized vulnerability. Biermann's "*Hitlerflittchen*", though emerging from a different historical moment, similarly reflects this fusion of national history with the tropes of seduction and ambiguous complicity. The following imagery in *Mein Kiez* is deliberately graphic. Berlin is "*gevierteilt*" [quartered], "*gefesselt*" [tied up], and sexually assaulted: "*Auch sie rissen der zerrissnen Stadt / Den Rock hoch und runter die Hosen*" [They too yanked up the torn city's skirt and yanked down its trousers]. Biermann employs poetic devices that heighten this brutality. The chiasmus "*Den Rock hoch und runter die Hosen*" intensifies the gesture's obscenity; the polyptoton "*rissen der zerrissnen Stadt*" doubles the violence through sound and syntax; and enjambement accelerates the pace, mimicking the force of the act itself. Even ironic phrases like "*manierliche Sitten*" [polite manners] and "*elegante Franzosen*" [elegant Frenchmen] add a layer of bitter sarcasm. Between the two Biermann poems, the "*Freier*" as Berlin's counterpart has shifted from lyric speaker to aggressor. This semantic inversion mirrors the transformation of Berlin itself: no longer an object of conflicted affection, she becomes the site of coercion and conquest. Through this reversal, Biermann translates the collapse of postwar ideals into an image of sexualized domination, turning Berlin's feminization into a metaphor for collective violation and the loss of political agency.

As Katharina Graßmann (2002) notes, the metaphor of the raped woman, while not unique to this period, takes on a particular cultural function in the postwar imaginary. She identifies it as a "*zeittypische Erfahrung*" [typical experience of the time] and a "*Massenschicksal*" [collective fate] that shaped literary representations of the 1950s (Graßmann 2002, 88). Biermann draws on this topos not to document historical events but to convert them into aesthetic experience. In addition, Graßmann argues that postwar depictions of sexual violence were often used to reframe German women as collective victims and, by extension, to position the German people themselves in a narrative of victimhood: "*In diesem Sinne wurden [...] die Massenvergewaltigungen instrumentalisiert zu einem Gewaltverbrechen an der gesamten deutschen Bevölkerung*" [In this sense, the mass rapes were instrumentalized as a crime against the entire German population] (Graßmann 2002, 88). Berlin in Biermann's *Mein Kiez* embodies this transference from individual trauma to national allegory.

This rhetorical move distinguishes *Mein Kiez* from other literary engagements with rape in the urban context of Berlin. Gerstenberger (2008), in her reading of Inka Parei's novel *Die Schattenboxerin* (1999), examines a nar-

rative in which the violation of a woman, occurring in West Berlin shortly before the fall of the Wall, becomes entangled with the changing cityscape. While the novel closely links personal trauma with the transforming urban environment, the city itself remains a setting, not the subject of violation.

As Gerstenberger writes,

> *"Parei responds to the semantic construction of the city as female from the perspective of the violated woman," but "her novel [...] is not a political allegory of Berlin's division and unification but the story of a woman who draws on the urban landscape to narrate her experience of violation and recovery" (Gerstenberger 2008, 36).*

In *Mein Kiez*, by contrast, the metaphor is pushed further: the feminized city becomes the violated figure itself. This transformation from backdrop to embodied poetic subject marks a shift in how sexual violence is used to allegorize national experience.

In *Berlin, du deutsche deutsche Frau,* the lyric subject actively engages with Berlin as their addressee. In *Mein Kiez*, however, the lyric subject withdraws from direct identification. Instead of speaking to or for the city, the speaker adopts a critical and distanced perspective. Rather than expressing empathy or mourning, the speaker uses stark and graphic language depicting its sexual violation by the occupying powers to expose the brutal consequences of war and political domination. The tone is deliberately unsentimental; there is no idealization of the victim or glorification of the victors. Instead, the speaker uses irony and linguistic compression to underscore the violence of Hitler's regime and the Allies' postwar occupation. Terms such as "*manierliche Sitten*" and "*elegante Franzosen*" are deployed ironically to highlight the dissonance between civilized appearance and violent action. The poem does not position the speaker as a defender of Berlin, but as a voice that critically reflects on both the city's complicity and the external aggression it suffers. This ambivalent position neither romanticizes nor absolves; it instead renders visible the moral contradictions of postwar power structures and the symbolic violence embedded in Berlin's division.

Thus, the feminization of Berlin in *Mein Kiez* functions as a rhetorical strategy to expose political violence and historical trauma. By depicting the city as a prostituted and violated woman, Biermann translates the geopolitical fragmentation of Berlin into a bodily experience. This metaphor draws on a broader postwar discourse that, as Graßmann notes, recasts real and

often silenced experiences of rape into a symbol of collective suffering. Biermann's use of feminization does not offer resolution or redemption; instead, it creates a poetic space where the tension between political responsibility and lived experience becomes perceptible.

Viewed comparatively, all four texts illustrate how feminized personifications of Berlin serve distinct poetic functions, shaped by historical context and the affective positioning of the speaker. Kolmar constructs Berlin as a she-bear with a maternal presence that both embodies and exceeds normative femininity. Her "Bärin" enacts care and protection, yet these gestures carry an ambivalent force, merging nurture with authority and potential destruction. She shelters, nourishes, and watches over the city's development, ultimately persisting beyond its transformation. In Knef's poem on the other hand, Berlin becomes not an abstract or mythic figure, but a domestic one. Feminization here grants the city an affective reliability, linking it to a postwar ideal of care and familiarity, even as this image remains ideologically conservative. In Biermann's *Berlin, du deutsche deutsche Frau*, the feminized Berlin takes on the role of a lover that is estranged, yet impossible to abandon. Whereas in *Mein Kiez*, feminization takes the form of violent sexualization: Berlin appears as a prostituted woman subjected to domination by the Allied powers. While the former mobilizes gendered imagery to express conflicted belonging, the latter employs it to expose the structural violence of occupation.

Although the analyzed corpus is limited, it spans different historical moments across the twentieth century and includes both poetry and song, revealing how gendered figuration serves as one means of articulating Berlin's changing identity. In the texts by Kolmar and Knef, both female authors, the city is cast in maternal or domestic terms that foreground care and resilience, while in Biermann's work, feminization becomes a medium for expressing desire, estrangement, and political critique. Taken together, these examples show how Berlin's literary imagination draws on conventional models of femininity yet adapts them to register specific historical conditions, from Weimar modernity to postwar reconstruction and the Cold War divide. Read against the broader tradition of Berlin poetry, these works demonstrate how twentieth-century (song-)writers use feminization to translate political upheaval and social transformation into affective experience.

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Endnotes

1 The quotation "*Berlin, du deutsche deutsche Frau*" ("Berlin, you German German woman") is the title of the poetry collection by Wolf Biermann (2008) and the titular poem (1962) that will be discussed in this article.

2 All translations from German are my own unless otherwise noted.