German cinema has played a leading, emancipatory role in the annals of gay and lesbian film, starting in 1919 with Anders als die Andern/Different from the Rest (starring the haunting Conrad Veidt [of Caligari fame] as a gay man who commits suicide), to the current cinema of queer Berlin directors, including Ulrike Ottinger, Lothar Lambet, Rosa von Praunheim, and Michael Stock. Lesbian representation was strong as early as G. W. Pabst’s Die Büchse der Pandora/Pandora’s Box (1928), in the character of the Countess Geschwitz, and Leontine Sagan’s Mädchen in Uniform (1931, remade 1957), a film on boarding-school infatuation. Indeed, the two leading actresses of Mädchen in Uniform, Hertha Thiele and Dorothea Wieck, starred in a subsequent film on same-sex love entitled Anna and Elisabeth (1933). Following upon the example set in Mädchen in Uniform as well as Pandora’s Box, subsequent Weimar and even Nazi films explored the erotic potential of androgyny through the sexually ambivalent Hosenrolle; female cross-dressing forms the main conceit in Der Geiger von Florenz/The Fiddler from Florence (1927), Dona Juana (1927), Victor and Victoria (1933), Schwarzer Jäger Johanna/The Black Hunter Johanna (1935) and Capriccio (1938).

In the productive years for German lesbian cinema during the 1980s and 1990s, the crossing of gender boundaries and heterosexual norms frequently came to be associated with a different kind of boundary crossing—that of place. Already in 1977, Ulrike Ottinger’s women in Madame X take to the high seas; then in her 1979 film, Bildnis einer Trinkerin/Ticket of No Return, a luxuriantly dressed but silent foreigner flies to Berlin for a self-indulgent drinking spree. Alexandra von Grote set the same-sex female relationship in her Novembermond/November Moon (1985) in Nazi-occupied Paris; and, after the female homosociality of most of her films, Margarethe von Trotta finally broached lesbianism directly in Die Rückkehr/L’Africana (1990), again taking Paris as the prime setting. The brief lesbian affair in Ingemar Engström’s Flucht in den Norden/Flight to the North (1985) occurs in Finland. And Monika Treut shows her lesbian lead in Die Jungfrauen Maschine/Virgin Machine (1988) and My Father is Coming (1991) crossing the Atlantic to set up home in San Francisco and New York City respectively. Likewise the sci-fi lesbian fantasy, Flaming Ears (by Angela Hans Scheirl, Ursula Pürrer and Dietmar Schipke [1991]), suggests that the lesbian woman breaks away from confines associated with the homeland and inhabits an elsewhere. To be included in this list is the video by Elizabeth Adowowa-Abraham documenting the German lesbian community’s commemoration of Audre Lorde. Footage of Lorde reading in Switzerland and Germany in the 1980s cuts to a 1992 Berlin gathering after her death to celebrate her poetry of hope and vitality. The video suggests that color, language, and nationality prove no impediment to lesbian unity; its fellowship can be established across borders and race (black and white women of all ages participate in the celebration).

In several of her films, Ottinger likewise suggests that a female-identified community can transcend while still respecting national boundaries, as occurs with the nonverbal friendship between the drinker and the bag lady in Ticket of No Return. In discussing this work, Judith Mayne speaks of Ottinger’s “eroticizing of the thresholds and boundaries that exist among women.” As exemplified by the flamboyant costumes worn and designed by Tabea Blumenschein in Ticket of No Return, the exoticized sensuality of Ottinger’s women is
intensified by their colorful, richly textured garments. Yet despite the almost campy heightened femininity it suggests—a kind of cross-dressing as female—this luxurious garb is donned as if it were totally natural, clinging, as it were, to the body in a caress. Ottinger’s women similarly slip, as in Johanna d’Arc of Mongolia (1989), into the foreign culture and, through bonding with the women there, wear this new culture as their own, without misappropriating or colonizing it. Through their woman-identified closeness, the outsiders either absorb and merge with the matriarchal civilization or stand in appreciative awe of it, in Ottinger’s investigation of the manifold registers of female desire.

The location of the lesbian on a non-native soil that welcomes her and in turn elicits from her an accepting, respectful attitude calls for a reinvestigation of how current discourses on sexuality and nationality intersect. In other words, how can the lesbian thematic reassess problems of social assimilation, territorialization, and appropriation? Conversely, how does the trope of mobility inform issues of gender and sexual affiliations? Moreover, how does the juxtaposition of sexual and national identity liberate one from the deterministic assumption that sexuality is cultural inheritance? Are nationality and sexuality inevitable and natural or variable and subject to expropriation? In raising these questions, the films listed above variously discover new ways of expressing how multi-centered realities can be. They thus challenge static views of identity alignment and are conceivably in a privileged position to do so, when one considers that gay and lesbian identity politics is arguably less highly profiled and activist in Germany than in the States, a difference which makes gay and lesbian German cinema more allegorical, fluid, and even inventive in the ways it encodes sexual preference.

So as to limit and define analysis of these far-reaching issues, I shall concentrate on two recent films that depict the lesbian abroad, but, following the tradition established by Ottinger and others, in a territory where her sexuality will not be the cause or focus for marginalization. In Rosa von Praunheim’s Überleben in New York/Survival in New York (1989) and Monika Treut’s My Father is Coming, the lesbian immigrant to New York is able to come out to herself and others in her newly adopted home, thanks precisely to a welcoming gay community. This openness to sexual alternatives sets the tone for a broadmindedness toward other cultural differences as well. Thus, the German background of the recent newcomer barely sets her apart in this multi-ethnic and multi-racial metropolis; there is hardly any question of her not fitting into certain strata of American society.

This situation stands in distinct contrast to earlier German films, such as Werner Herzog’s Stroszek (1976) or Wim Wenders’s Alice in den Städten/Alice in the Cities (1974) and Der Stand der Dinge/The State of Things (1982), that made the trip to the U.S. appear like an exile. Praunheim’s and Treut’s work, exhibiting no nostalgia for life back home, is also distinct from the longing for family that infuses Chantal Akerman’s News from Home (1977), where a constant voice-over reads a French mother’s letters to her daughter in New York. Praunheim and Treut are thus closer to the postmodern sensibility of Wenders’s Bis ans Ende der Welt/Until the End of the World (1991) which makes its travellers seemingly at ease at stopovers around the globe. Yet an important difference sets Survival in New York and My Father is Coming apart from these other films occurring in the States: the effortless crossing of cultural barriers is simultaneously a very natural crossing or obscuring of heterosexual gender boundaries. In fact, queer sexuality rather than nationality becomes the major (now positive) signifier of difference.

Rosa von Praunheim’s Survival in New York is a documentary about three German women who, each in their unique way, establish new lives for themselves in the Big Apple.
The film is in German, with the occasional English interview translated in voice-over. As these women alternately narrate in bits and pieces the history of their sojourn in New York, the camera roams throughout the city noting its diversity of race, class, and culture. The editing mitigates and breaches, however, divisions and differences; as Praunheim cuts from one woman to the next, the spectator senses a fluidity and commonality between them, as if their lives stood for the flux of life in Manhattan.

These women have crossed not only national borders but racial divisions as well. Uli, a nurse and animal rights activist, falls in love with a Guardian Angel Safety Patrolman and lives for three years with him in Harlem as the only white woman in the neighborhood. She then hooks up with an emotionally disabled white Vietnam vet. Anna, a go-go dancer and psychotherapist who councils in an African-American Catholic school, marries a black man whom she met dancing and whose stylish flair matches her own striking appearance. Claudia, the third woman, comes to the U.S. with a German boyfriend, whom she dumps when her lesbian tendencies start to grow. Before the camera she enumerates what New York has helped her realize: the extroverted element in her personality, the freedom to acknowledge who she is, and the total opening of herself. She admits to having been confronted with complete truths about herself. To get her green card, Claudia marries an underground theater star who specializes in transvestite parts and who enters the marriage as if it were another stage role. It is her lesbian partner Ryan who locates John for Claudia.

If Claudia's "marriage" is theatrical and queer, then the other two women make straightness seem like drag. The hyperbolic manneredness with which Anna and Uli display
femininity suggests a conscious, controlled playing with sexual normativity that bespeaks a gay sensibility, despite the fact that ultrafemininity is normally—and here as well—associated with heterosexuality. Anna, for instance, performs at the go-go club with cool, amused detachment in moves obviously calculated to arouse men. Uli wears doll-like garb—dressed either totally in bright red with matching accessories or in shades of pink (perhaps in honor of Rosa)—with two large ponytails tied up with conspicuous bows. She carries a Little-Red-Riding Hood basket to complete the look. These women present themselves as playing with gender and experimenting with sexual self-expression. In addition, their willingness to appear before the camera serves as a crucial dimension to their conscious articulation of an eroticized selfhood.

In one scene in particular, Claudia, who is probably in her mid- to late forties, poses as a nude model in an artist’s studio, evidently comfortable not only in front of the artist but before the camera as well. The fact that the three women have freely adopted their new environment and thrive in it underscores how they have constructed an identity for themselves, including its sexual component. By documenting their lives, Praunheim, a gay male director, exuberantly affirms their choices.

Central here is the fact that sexuality, for which Claudia’s lesbianism is paradigmatic, is encoded as a realignment of national and cultural affiliation. In this shift what is important is not that German and American cultures are compared: there is no dichotomous weighing of the pros and cons of each country, for Claudia, Anna, and Uli live in the here-and-now of New York. National heritage is thus incidental and decidedly not formative. Moreover, Praunheim in no way stereotypes these women as German, as Percy Adlon does with the characters Marianne Sägebrecht plays in Out of Rosenheim/Bagdad Café (1988) and Rosalie Goes Shopping (1990). What is important instead is the naturalness with which Praunheim’s women have adopted a different cultural lifestyle. In the postmodern mélange of this film, they step over prescribed ethnic and gender roles as well as sexual and racial taboos without making a big deal of it. Furthermore, the new identities they assume do not appear arbitrary or frivolous, as if they were simply donning clothing or costuming (despite the importance of dress just discussed). Anna, Uli, and Claudia do not exude the impression that they are merely tourists playing at being American: instead their originally fashioned cross-identifications sit comfortably with them. In other words, despite the autonomy they exercise in their sometimes flamboyant lifestyle choices (which links them to Praunheim’s other lead roles, Lotti Huber in Anita: Tänze des Lasters/Anita: Dances of Vice [1988] and Charlotte von Mahlsdorf in I am My Own Woman) and in order to deter us from jumping to the conclusion that gender performance is synonymous with inauthenticity, all three women give the strong impression of sincerity and conviction.

It thus must be underscored that to attribute their individuality to the move to New
York would be a reductive reading of the film that would rob the women of their own agency. Undoubtedly, New York exposes these women to unfamiliar and varied experiences, but Praunheim does not thereby suggest that the new cultural and social environment determines their characters, insofar as the three never express the need or desire to be assimilated. In other words, the new location signals or signifies their individuality more than it is the cause of it. Just as these women energetically experiment with different sexual identities, so too, by not dwelling on their nationality, do they portray national character and its inheritance as arbitrary and the concept of it as inappropriate. There is an ethics of cosmopolitanism at work here that derives from the same spirit as sexual tolerance. In addition, the novelty as well as the odd diversity of America that these German women (together with Praunheim) appreciatively experience—the *queerness* of this new land (to use the word as a trope)—paradoxically makes them fit in as foreigners. Here I deploy the word queer guardedly not to reify otherness (in this case America) but, on the contrary, in Eve Sedgwick’s definition of the term, to refer to “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances, and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning [that can’t be made] to signify monolithically.”

By situating the lesbian in a foreign setting, of course, one runs the risk of falling into another stereotype—the lesbian as an exotic rarity. As I’ve suggested, by showing Claudia, Uli, and Anna effortlessly *crossing* boundaries, Rosa von Praunheim works against a binary mode of perception that creates otherness, whether it be sexual or ethnic exoticism. Monika Treut, by contrast, has an eye for the stylish, exoticized, hyped presentation of her lesbian lead roles. Both Shelley Kastner in *My Father Is Coming* and Ina Blum in *Virgin Machine* are chic brunette beauties with dark eyes made up wide—the effeminized Belladonna look that Richard Dyer in his book *Now You See It* decodes as gay. In fact, more so than Praunheim (at least in *Survival in New York*), Treut does not shy away from exploring the realms of erotica and erotica, thereby making more theoretically intriguing the intersections between native and foreign.

In brief, the story of *My Father is Coming* is this: Vicky, who waits tables and tries to land acting jobs, gets a visit from her rather overweight German father Hans. When he first arrives, he behaves like a stereotypical German tourist who comes to colonize and civilize America; he brings sausage in his suitcase and insists “you can’t find the likes of it in New York” and then asks if at least the water is potable. Yet the more obnoxiously he behaves as a foreigner, the more he is reminded by others of the Germans’ Nazi past. Vicky, in the meantime, hits a streak of bad luck. While her father lands a spot in a commercial, Vicky auditions in vain to get a part in Annie Sprinkle’s new film *Pornutopia*. Then she is torn in her amorous leanings: she finds herself attracted simultaneously to a handsome female-to-male transsexual and to her co-worker, a Puerto Rican woman named Lisa, who suffered abject poverty in childhood and now loves to eat. When her father discovers the two women in bed together, after Vicky has acted as if her gay roommate Ben were her husband, he (the father) disappears. After a kind of New Age sexual experience
with Annie, the exposure to sex shops, and an encounter with a middle-aged guru who practices skin-piercing, Hans, espying Vicky in a bar, goes in to tell her he accepts her lifestyle. He toasts America and soon leaves for home sporting a baseball cap.

Jo, the transsexual, states that “people should have the choice to become who they are.” One’s past—whether it be one’s nationality (Hans), class (Lisa), or even sex (Jo)—can be altered. Who a person is can never be taken for granted despite all appearances. Treut seems to suggest, moreover, that one becomes who one is through acting. Hans begins his transformation by starring in a commercial, and Vicky appears to fully realize her passion for Lisa in a torch song she performs at a club. In a fine example of the simulacrum, Annie Sprinkle even makes an audition for a porno flick an occasion for imaginatively experiencing sexual ecstasy—or so it seems. Conversely, the real “put-on,” the marriage, is seen through as just an act.

In a scene in Vicky’s apartment, the camera pans across a poster of Marlene Dietrich in a man’s suit; is this immaculate actress gay or straight, German or American? If sexuality isn’t something given but something one becomes or acts out, then nationality too is a matter of performance. The opening sequence shows Vicky auditioning for a part as a German tourist in a Chinese restaurant and being coached to behave like a concentration camp commandant. The scene exposes American prejudices against Germans, yet it also suggests that national affiliation is a pose or put-on anyway. The film points out that in order to have your nationality recognized, you have to act it out, thereby suggesting that it is not something readily knowable or readable let alone natural. Thus Lisa, who speaks like a native New Yorker, says no one believes her when she says she is Puerto Rican. Hans’s boorishness and heavy German accent make his adherence to his national identity look ridiculous. Then, in adopting American culture, Hans and Vicky make Americanisms—like the baseball cap—seem arbitrary. This is not to say that the film levels ethnic or cultural differences or is fundamentally indifferent to them, but that it plays up their queerness. This film portrays nationality, American as well as German, as a form of drag.

Significantly, neither Vicky nor Hans can pass as Americans, yet they can cross-over into the new culture. Rather than flawlessly imitating American speech, dress, or gestures, they retain the marks of cultural difference. Indeed, one could say that Treut has them adopting a nationality that is not their own in order to highlight and resignify these differences ironically. The gap between performance and “original” clearly emphasizes that one is not what one performs, yet not in any negative sense. By the end of the film, Hans no longer takes for granted as natural and self-evident what we the viewers saw as arbitrary, namely his German prejudices against America. Instead, upon being exposed to the theatricality of porn and skin-piercing artists, Hans himself becomes accepting of and even playful with signifiers of identity. We the audience in turn become accepting of his overweight body and welcome, along with Annie Sprinkle, his expressing sexual desire. In other words, the citationality of a nationalistic mode of behavior that makes Hans look ridiculous does not have to be compulsory, as it is for him at the start of the film, but can be voluntary and playful. Rejoicing at playing a part in a commercial and earning big bucks for it, Hans learns to cite and mime American customs with ease. Nor is Hans’s mimicry of American customs a question of assimilation, in other words, of his need to recognize himself in the signifiers of another culture and to remain in this country. That this does not occur is not a disappointment to him but rather a liberation from fixed identity categories, the source of judgmental prejudice; hence he accepts his daughter’s sexuality, which, significantly, is also not easily pigeonholed.
If Hans not only crosses the Atlantic but (in his coming of age) the taboo that older men don’t have the right to explore new sexualities (let alone have them depicted on screen), then Vicky too crosses various sexual norms. She is implicitly classed as a femme when Ben asks her if she has ever made it with a dyke, and indeed she plays the femme to Lisa’s butch. But she also tries, unsuccessfully, to pass as a married, straight woman (and even faintly comes on to Ben at one point when they are alone together in her bedroom watching gay male porn). Moreover, she welcomes Jo’s hot attentions, and only later finds out that Jo is a transsexual. Are we to read Vicky’s variegated sexual interests as a mark of indecisiveness or ambivalence, especially when compared to other characters who more actively pursue their sexual desires? Or is Vicky best characterized as a bisexual femme who knows she wants it all? That we do not know the answers to these questions is in itself significant.

Biddy Martin has noted the subversive potential of the femme for deconstructing reifying gender categories: “The very fact that the femme may pass implies the possibility of denaturalizing heterosexuality by emphasizing the permeabilities of gay/straight boundaries. In a sense, the lesbian femme who can supposedly pass could be said most successfully to displace the opposition between imitation (of straight roles) and lesbian specificity, since she is neither the same nor different, but both.” Vicky’s femmeness indeed does demonstrate the permeability of gay and straight boundaries, especially when she feels attracted to Jo, leading us to speculate whether she is fascinated by his maleness, femininity, or the confusion between the two, and whether her attraction is intensified after she learns of Jo’s sex change. Thus, despite her passivity in comparison to other characters, the very mutability of Vicky’s desires places her in a central position in the film around which the others circulate. She may not define herself as lesbian, but what is important is that she experiences lesbian sex and directs her desires to characters who are not straight. Treut thereby eschews adherence to sexual identity categorizations.

In terms of nationality, here too Vicky performs a key role; neither German nor American, in Biddy Martin’s terms, “neither the same nor different, but both,” she deconstructs the opposition. In addition, Treut avoids, as does Praunheim, propagating the prevalent image of America as the land of, in this case, erotic freedom. These directors do not equate sexual liberation with exposure to America or queer sexuality with being American, as it might seem in a facile reading of the travel narrative in these films. Indeed, the butch-looking women in the film come precisely from different countries; Vicky’s two neighbors are Hungarian, and, as mentioned, Lisa is Puerto Rican. Moreover, Ben goes after Latino men. In other words, neither Praunheim nor Treut simplistically map sexual preference onto national difference, an insidious move which would reify gay/straight and native/foreign oppositions.

Thus in their studies in postmodern cross-culturalism both Treut and Praunheim advocate a truly queer nationhood. In the foreign land, one’s search for identity leads neither back to one’s cultural roots nor to adaptation and assimilation but to an allegiance to queerness, which is to say, to the productive dissonances in the cross-identifications that compose one’s personality. The very word “queer” affirms both one’s immigrant and sexual status as an outsider and marks them not as a stigma but as a performance and thus as a choice. Praunheim’s and Treut’s immigrants do not so much discover a monolithic America and try to fit in to its social structure as they construct a community of another culture for themselves. They (as well as we, the spectator) see this country through their eyes. The determining paradigm for this queering of national and cultural identity is decidedly the receptivity both films demonstrate to a range of sexual expression and experimentation. In
these works, the term sexual politics takes on new meaning.

A speculative addendum: The conjunction of sexuality and nationality in these films leads one to reflect on the terms of a German national cinema. On the one hand, one may ask to what extent Treut’s work is German. The pun in the title My Father is Coming is untranslatable in German. Her films have received more approbation and distribution in the States than in Germany. Furthermore, as discussed, My Father is Coming successfully breaks down the barriers between native and foreign cultures. Treut’s example thus calls into question what the concept of a national cinema would be. On the other hand, both she and Praunheim draw on an important lineage in German cinema that has all too often been overlooked as a tradition, namely its queerness— from Anders als die Andern through the odd encodings of desire in Nosferatu (1922) and the Hosenrolle films,15 to Fassbinder and his heirs.16 Here too, then, sexuality provocatively steps in to query what constitutes national distinctiveness, specifically, the definitional contours of German cinema.

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2Cf. Judith Butler, Bodies that Matter. On the Discursive Limits of “Sex” (New York: Routledge, 1993) 239: “There is no one femininity with which to identify, which is to say that femininity might itself offer an array of identificatory sites, as the proliferation of lesbian femme possibilities attests.”
3Praunheim has also documented the life of the famous male to female cross-dresser, Charlotte von Mahlsdorf in Ich bin meine eigene Frau // I am My Own Woman.
7How well Lisa serves as an example of upward class mobility is debatable; she works back in the kitchen, while Vicky, the prettier woman with the sexy European accent, is brought out front to serve tables.
8In her recent short Taboo Parlor, included in the omnibus film Érotique (1994), Treut continues this tradition of criss-crossing nationalities: her two lesbian characters speak English but live in Hamburg.
9Here I am indebted to the distinctions Judith Butler draws in her discussion of gender performance in Bodies that Matter.
10Another example of compulsory citation of ethnic affiliation that, however, is no less terrible for being performed occurs in the opening sequence when Vicky, in a casting tryout, is being coached to act the “typical” German, i.e., obnoxiously.
11Again the character of Lisa is troubling for her latent racism; as Biddy Martin would notice, “the femme-butch couple [is] made visibly different by way of skin color.” Martin, “Sexualities without Genders and Other Queer Utopias,” Diacritics 24 (1994) 115.
12Martin 113.


16Surveys and histories of German cinema (most recently Geschichte des deutschen Films, eds. Wolfgang Jacobsen, Anton Kaes, and Hans Helmut Prinzler [Stuttgart: Metzler, 1993]) may comment on the theme of homosexuality in individual films but neglect it as a persistent tradition.