

An illustration of a woman in a yellow coat and hat sitting in a red train seat. A large brown suitcase is on the floor next to her. A window to her right shows a landscape with a utility pole. The text 'Sophie Discovers Amerika' is at the top.

Sophie Discovers Amerika

*German-Speaking
Women Write
the New World*

EDITED BY ROB MCFARLAND
AND MICHELLE STOTT JAMES

Sophie Discovers Amerika

German-Speaking Women
Write the New World

Edited by
Rob McFarland and Michelle Stott James



CAMDEN HOUSE

Rochester, New York

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Studies in German Literature, Linguistics, and Culture

Foreword

IN MANY WAYS, the collection of essays *Sophie Discovers Amerika: German-Speaking Women Write the New World* is a groundbreaking contribution to the emergent field of German Transatlantic Literary Studies. It is a lively and engaging book that seeks to confirm the important role that women writers have played in the transatlantic experience. The volume brings together an impressive, wide range of essays on German women authors from the eighteenth century to the present and their various encounters with and depictions of the New World. It examines fiction, for example by Sophie La Roche, Mathilde Franziska Anneke, Gabriele Reuter, Anna Seghers, and Christa Wolf; life writing and travelogues by Ida Pfeiffer, Regula Engel, Klara May, and Milena Moser; journalism by Annemarie Schwarzenbach; and the film adaption of the popular novels on Native Americans by the GDR writer Liselotte Welskopf-Henrich. The collection also offers a most welcome bibliography on "The New World in German-Language Literature by Women" that should provoke further scholarly inquiry and important critical work in the context of transatlantic activity.

In their substantial introduction, the editors devote some thought to the well-debated issue of exclusiveness. Why prepare a collection merely of women's writing about the New World? Far from rejecting inclusiveness per se, that is, an anthology of both male and female writers and their transatlantic experience, they argue convincingly that at this early stage of the recovery of women's contributions to New World writing, a diversified collection may seriously curtail an understanding of the breadth and depth of women's experiences. The editors suggest ways in which the analysis of an exclusive collection of women's texts adds to existing male representations of America. Most likely, we can expect a specific manner in which women writers approached the New World and dealt with "foreignness," male superiority, and nationhood based on their own sociopolitical positioning in the Old World, their cultural practices and search for self-definition. Indeed, the collection provides a fascinating overview of four centuries of women's writing that participates in the debate on cultural and ethnic otherness, social and political agendas, or subversive actions with regard to foreign spaces by using fiction, life writing, essays, and journalism as a testing ground for the transatlantic and transnational experience.

Why is there a "Sophie" in the title of this book? The well-known project "Sophie: A Digital Library of Works by German-Speaking

Women” is accessible on a website established with the goal of collecting rare texts by early German women authors and making them available to professional users and a broad reading audience. Scholars and students alike have praised this adventurous project, born many years ago at Brigham Young University. Michelle Stott James is the founder of this pioneering project that she now codirects with Rob McFarland. The idea for the volume they now present has been inspired by their many years of collecting books for the digital library.

Sophie Discovers Amerika is a challenging and important book that maps the multiple experiences of German-writing women who actually visited the New World or traveled and inhabited it within their texts. Cross-cultural insights and unexpected views are plentiful in this collection of twenty-three articles. Both specialists and general readers will enjoy reading *Sophie Discovers Amerika* and will recognize its significant achievement and contribution to both the field of German literature and Transatlantic Studies.

Gisela Brinker-Gabler

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Rob McFarland
Michelle Stott James

Contents

Foreword	ix
<i>Gisela Brinker-Gabler</i>	
Acknowledgments	xi
Introduction	1
<i>Rob McFarland and Michelle Stott James</i>	
1: "Schwimme mit mir hinüber zu den Hütten unserer Nachbarn": Colonial Islands in Sophie von La Roche's <i>Erscheinungen am See Oneida</i> (1798) and Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's <i>Paul et Virginie</i> (1788)	16
<i>Linda Dietrick</i>	
2: "Hier oder nirgends ist Amerika!": America and the Idea of Autonomy in Sophie Mereau's "Elise" (1800)	30
<i>Tom Spencer</i>	
3: A "Swiss Amazon" in the New World: Images of America in the <i>Lebensbeschreibung</i> of Regula Engel (1821)	45
<i>Julie Koser</i>	
4: Amalia Schoppe's <i>Die Auswanderer nach Brasilien oder die Hütte am Gigitonhonha</i> (1828)	56
<i>Gabi Kathöfer</i>	
5: Inscribed in the Body: Ida Pfeiffer's <i>Reise in die neue Welt</i> (1856)	65
<i>Ulrike Brisson</i>	
6: Mathilde Franziska Anneke's Anti-Slavery Novella <i>Umland in Texas</i> (1866)	81
<i>Denise M. Della Rossa</i>	
7: "Ich bin ein Pioneer": Sidonie Grünwald-Zerkowitz's <i>Die Lieder der Mormonin</i> (1887) and the Erotic Exploration of Exotic America	92
<i>Sarah C. Reed</i>	

- 8: Seductive and Destructive: Argentina in Gabriele Reuter's
Kolonistenvolk (1889) 102
David Tingey
- 9: Inventing America: German Racism and Colonial Dreams in
Sophie Wörishöffer's *Im Goldlande Kalifornien* (1891) 111
Nicole Grewling
- 10: *Aus vergangenen Tagen: Eine Erzählung aus der Sklavenzeit*
(1906): Clara Berens's German American "Race Melodrama"
in Its American Literary Contexts 125
Judith E. Martin
- 11: "Der verfluchte Yankee!" Gabriele Reuter's *Episode Hopkins*
(1889) and *Der Amerikaner* (1907) 138
Christiane Arndt
- 12: Reframing the Poetics of the Aztec Empire: Gertrud Kolmar's
"Die Aztekin" (1920) 150
Carola Daffner
- 13: Synthesis, Gender, and Race in Alice Salomon's *Kultur im*
Werden (1924) 162
Christine Rinne
- 14: Land of Fantasy, Land of Fiction: Klara May's *Mit Karl May*
durch Amerika (1931) 171
Maureen O. Gallagher
- 15: An Ideological Framing of Annemarie Schwarzenbach's
Racialized Gaze: Writing and Shooting for the
USA-Reportagen (1936–38) 183
Ute Bettray
- 16: "Fighting against Manitou": German Identity and Ilse
Schreiber's Canada Novels *Die Schwestern aus Memel* (1936)
and *Die Flucht in Paradies* (1939) 205
Florentine Strzelczyk
- 17: Mexico as a Model for How to Live in the Times of History:
Anna Seghers's *Crisanta* (1951) 219
Thomas W. Kniesche

18: East Germany's Imaginary Indians: Liselotte Welskopf-Henrich's <i>Harka</i> Cycle (1951–63) and Its DEFA Adaptation <i>Die Söhne der Großen Bärin</i> (1966) <i>Petra Watzke</i>	230
19: Finding Identity through Traveling the New World: Angela Krauß's <i>Die Überfliegerin</i> (1995) and <i>Milliarden neuer Sterne</i> (1999) <i>Monika Hobbein-Deegen</i>	240
20: Discovery or Invention: Newfoundland in Gabrielle Alioth's <i>Die Erfindung von Liebe und Tod</i> (2003) <i>Silke R. Falkner</i>	253
21: Tzveta Sofronieva's "Über das Glück nach der Lektüre von Schopenhauer, in Kalifornien" (2007) <i>Chantal Wright</i>	261
22: "Amerika ist alles und das Gegenteil von allem. Amerika ist anders." Milena Moser's Travel Guide to San Francisco (2008) <i>Karin Baumgartner</i>	275
Bibliography: The New World in German-Language Literature by Women	287
Notes on the Contributors	299
Index	305

Introduction

Rob McFarland and Michelle Stott James

Amerika, du hast es besser
als unser Kontinent, der alte,
hast keine verfallenen Schlösser
und keine Basalte.
Dich stört nicht im Innern zu lebendiger Zeit
unnützes Erinnern und vergeblicher Streit
Benutzt die Gegenwart mit Glück!
Und wenn nun eure Kinder dichten
Bewahre sie ein gut Geschick
Vor Ritter-, Räuber und Gespenstergeschichten.

[America, you're better off
than our continent, the old one
you have no castle ruins
and no Basalt deposits
In your vital moments you are not deeply disturbed
By useless remembering and futile strife

So happily sieze the present!
And when your children write their own poems
May a glad fate help keep them away
From by-gone tales of knights, robbers and ghosts.]

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, “Den Vereinigten
Staaten” (“To the United States”)¹

IN CHRISTA WOLF’S FINAL NOVEL, *Stadt der Engel oder The Overcoat of Dr. Freud* (City of Angels or The Overcoat of Dr. Freud, 2010), a very recognizable dissident writer from the former East Germany is invited as a guest artist of the so-called “Center” near Los Angeles. The narrator initially intends to use her year in America to further her writing, but instead she must watch helplessly from across the ocean as her reputation is destroyed by revelations about her connections to the former East German *Stasi* (short for *Staatssicherheitsdienst*, or State Security Service). Trying to explain her predicament to an acquaintance, Wolf’s narrator comes to a conclusion that sounds like the first line of Goethe’s poem:

Sally war mein Versuchsmensch . . . Im Schutz der fremden Sprache und des fremden Ozeans sah ich mich dort stehen . . . und ihr die verschiedenen Sorten von Akten erklären, the bad files and the good files, sie mußte lachen: Ach, ihr Deutschen!

. . . Hör zu! sagte ich, kannst du dir nicht vorstellen, wie dir wird, wenn dir aus so einer Akte zwei Buchstaben entgegenschlagen . . . I. M.—weißt du überhaupt, was das heißt?
No, sagte Sally, unbefangen, I have no idea.

Glückliches Amerika! Stasi, ja, das habe sie gehört . . .
Informeller Mitarbeiter, wie sollte ich das auf Englisch sagen?

[Sally was the subject of my first experiment . . . I saw myself standing there protected by the foreign language and the foreign ocean . . . explaining to her the different kinds of files, *the bad files and the good files*, and she just laughed: Oh, you Germans!

. . . Listen! I said, can you imagine the feeling you get when two letters jump out of one of these files . . . I. M.—do you even know what that means?
No, said Sally, ingenuously, *I have no idea*.

Happy America! Stasi, yes, she had heard that term . . .
Informeller Mitarbeiter,—Informal Operative—how could I explain that to her in English?²

Far from home and ambivalent about the politics and culture that surround her, the narrator must grapple with the toxic fallout of exactly the kind of “unnützes Erinnern und vergeblicher Streit” (useless remembering and futile strife) that Goethe associated with Europe in his often-quoted poem. The beaches of Santa Monica, like Goethe’s ideal image of America, are spaces devoid of the entrapments of history. Wolf’s America is a metaphorical shoreline: her narrator spends her time beachcombing California’s freeways, bookstores, and living rooms looking for Germany’s historical flotsam and jetsam that have washed up on American shores. In a landscape at once far removed from Germany and yet entwined in its past, Wolf’s narrator tries to face the *Gespensstergeschichten* (ghost stories) of her socialist past and the dark deposits left by fascism, the horrors of the Holocaust, and the misunderstood revolutions that brought about German reunification.

Acting as the shore where Germany’s shipwrecked intelligentsia found temporary and problematic refuge, Wolf’s Santa Monica stands pars pro toto for greater Los Angeles, the United States, and the New World. More than a background and less than a character, the beaches, freeways, and homes visited by her narrator are contradictory spaces—removed

from Germany's landscape and history, antithetical to German political ideals, but littered with the ghost-town effluvia of Brecht's, Mann's, and Feuchtwanger's "New Weimar unter Palmen" (new Weimar under palm trees).³ How can a reader navigate the functions of this space, at once irrevocably "other" and yet still echoing with some of the most significant voices that contributed to German cultural identity? One important way to approach this heterotopic space⁴ is to place Christa Wolf's representations of America into a broader historical and cultural context. Her textual version of Santa Monica resonates not only with the personal crises and intellectual heritage of the narrator, but also with the work of other German-speaking women whose writings about the New World span several centuries.

As the directors of *Sophie: A Digital Library of Works by German-Speaking Women* (<http://sophie.byu.edu/>), we have spent the better part of two decades collecting texts by German-speaking women and making them available to a broad reading audience. Our mission is first to make women's texts available and then to encourage scholars to explore the texts so that they can become a part of current critical discourses about gender, authorship, culture, and identity. As we search continuously through libraries and archives for long-overlooked German-language texts by women, we find that individual books, essays, and letters combine in surprising ways to reveal the contours of larger historical phenomena. Over the past few years, we have been fascinated by a particular constellation of texts that include representations of the New World, reaching across the centuries from Maria Sybilla Merian's 1699 Surinam jungle expedition and subsequent scientific treatise on caterpillars to Christa Wolf's final work about her own Californian soul searching, *Stadt der Engel*.

For this volume, we have invited scholars to engage with a sampling of these texts about the New World written by German-speaking women. The central purpose of this project is to tie these intriguing moments together through a series of critical essays. Each essay approaches a specific work of literature written by one author. Using a variety of different theoretical approaches, the contributing scholars analyze the intersection of gender, identity, place, and power in the texts. These texts represent a wide spectrum of genres, including novels, poetry, stories, films, erotica, photojournalism, travel literature, and memoirs. While many of the texts utilize settings in the United States, others have to do with Canada, Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, and other places in the Western Hemisphere. We have titled the volume *Sophie Discovers Amerika* as a reference to the Austrian journalist Ann Tizia Leitch's 1928 novel *Ursula entdeckt Amerika* (*Ursula Discovers America*). We consciously left the "k" in "Amerika" because the land that German-speaking women writers discover, explore, and imagine is not always the same America—or Americas—that can be found in other writings about the New World. In

many ways, it is a land of their own invention, given shape by profound influences from the German language, history, literature, and culture.

The texts themselves include fascinating, disturbing, and puzzling moments: In the earliest work treated in this volume, Sophie von La Roche's pregnant protagonist interrupts her project of building an island utopia on Lake Oneida so that she can swim across to the Native Americans who will act as midwives during her childbirth. In a nineteenth-century text addressed in this volume, Amalia Schoppe's virtuous German emigrant family, the Riemanns, overcome corrupt Brazilian officials and ignorant peasants as they free their son from indentured servitude, tame the wild South American jungle, and use their German know-how to set up a paradisiacal homestead that would make Father Adam himself proud. And, in a mid-twentieth-century text, Anna Seghers subtly criticizes East German iconography as she follows the path of an illiterate Mexican prostitute who is saved not by the revolutionary rhetoric of great leaders but by the simple, quiet acts of working-class women. Like Christa Wolf, each of these authors sends her characters to a foreign shore that serves as a projection space for German (and Austrian, Swiss, East-German, Prussian, Bavarian . . .) fantasies, fears, and conundrums.

Though our collection of essays about women's German-language New World literature does include many intriguing, perplexing moments similar to those mentioned above, there are several questions that need to be asked about the usefulness and scope of this project. The first and most obvious issue that might arise is this: why focus solely on texts by women when German-language literature about the New World includes not only relatively obscure male authors like Balduin Möllhausen and Charles Sealsfield but also such household names as Humboldt, Goethe, Kafka, and, for heaven's sake, Karl May? As the most immediate response, we note that it would seem important to at least include a proportional number of texts by women in any study that attempts to describe the reception of the New World, for no other reason than to promote thorough coverage of existing historical sources, many of which were written by women (as can be seen in the bibliography at the end of this volume). Often, as can be expected, women's writings are not included in studies of German-language interaction with the New World.⁵ In his study of the German representation of America in the nineteenth century, for example, Peter J. Brenner focuses on those literary interactions that are based on, in his words, "die reale Amerika-Erfahrung des Autors" (the real American experience of the author) and excludes those texts that he deems less authentic,⁶ in the sense of the literal physical encounter of the author with the land being described. Of the 148 literary works listed in his "Quellen zum deutschen Amerika-Bild" (sources for the study of the German image of America), Brenner includes exactly one work by a woman.⁷ His study suggests on the one hand that the contribution of

women to the German reception of America is almost nonexistent, and on the other that the nineteenth-century texts by German women that do describe America do not fall into the category of "authentic." While nineteenth-century women certainly did not enjoy the same degree of mobility as their husbands and brothers, the very existence of their prolific written works—including reports of real, authentic experiences with their feet on American soil—cannot responsibly be ignored.

Over the last two decades, scholars have worked hard to resuscitate the long-forgotten contributions of female writers who wrote about their travels or their dreams of travel to exotic locales beyond their European homelands. While women's texts about distant lands might at first seem indistinguishable from men's writing, and thus open to general comparison in terms of their eventual quality or to other criteria such as Brenner's "real experience," scholars have shown that women's writing reveals uniquely important facets of the European interaction with the rest of the world. As a way of making this uniqueness visible in travel and colonial literature by English women, Sarah Mills points out that women's travel literature must undergo a different process of creation, dissemination, and evaluation than that of men:

the difference is not a simplistic textual distinction between men's writing on one hand and women's writing on the other, but rather a series of discursive pressures on production and reception which female writers have to negotiate, in very different ways to males.⁸

Because of these differing discursive pressures, it is inevitable that the encounters with foreign spaces described by women will have a different character, flavor, and even purpose than those produced by men. For this reason, it is imperative that they be evaluated on the basis of their own idiom and methods of presentation rather than only in comparison with texts by men. While Mills focuses on the specific "discursive pressures" brought about by the material circumstances surrounding the creation, reception, and marketing of a book by a woman, Jane Robinson facetiously lists the more obvious pressures on women who would dare to travel and then have the audacity to write about it:

And where should a lady go on her travels? The world has hardly been her oyster in the past, thanks to the old chivalric image of the gentler, fairer, weaker sex . . . Assuming she is the sort of person willing to go abroad without some champion protecting her, she is still hardly equipped with the constitution to endure epic desert treks or polar crossings, to conquer really respectable mountains, or hole herself up with some secret tropic tribe somewhere. Yet greater disincentives are in store for those who worry about the danger of sexual harassment or assault, the inconvenience of menstruation, or,

more extremely, of childbirth, and kerbing those sensitive sentiments (or is it hormones?) which so notoriously govern a woman-in-general's life. And all that is when she has arrived, or is at least *en route*: what about the family at home? Who is going to manage the children/parents/housework while she is away?⁹

Robinson's litany of cynically labeled "disincentives" are only the most obvious of the "discursive pressures" that faced any woman who wanted to step outside of her assigned role, let alone those who wanted to travel and write about their experiences in a wider space than the "private sphere" to which they had traditionally been relegated.

However, these all-too-familiar stereotypical pressures not only restrict the discourse of women who write about faraway places, but also give it a unique shape; in Sara Mill's words, women adopt "a form of writing whose contours both disclose the nature of the dominant discourses and constitute a critique from the margins."¹⁰ Speaking as "illicit others," with a perspective on the world that falls outside of that reported by male authors who were more likely to be embedded in the mainstream, women can report with a freshness that illuminates aspects of life and culture that otherwise might go unnoticed. In this sense, the encounters of women with unknown, exotic spaces run parallel to the vision of America presented in the poem by Goethe above. Because of their marginality, women are themselves the "New World," dwelling in a space outside the "crumbling castles" and "useless memories" of the public sphere from which they have previously been excluded. It is this encounter of the "other"—women—with the "other"—non-European spaces—that imbues women's writing about the Americas with particular value. In describing the potential of this alternative discourse, Robinson quotes the English travel writer Lady Elizabeth Eastlake, who sees women's and men's travel writing as a "kind of partnership . . . to supply each others deficiencies."¹¹

In their analysis of this complementary contribution by women, scholars have noted the productive potential of some of the pressures and limitations placed on women who write about the wide world. We can only hint at a few of these here, many of which will be illuminated in some form in the critical essays included in this volume.

- Since they were often lacking the "authenticity" provided by actual travel, women were in a position to experiment with fiction and alternate forms and genres, which allowed them to explore the inner spaces of their own culture and experience against the canvas of the exotic unknown.¹² This includes what Annagret Pelz calls "Reisen in eigenen Interieur" (travel into one's own inner realm), a form that allowed the homebound woman to explore her own fantasy and memory as she experienced the world through