Numerous studies on the uneasiness of German identity have been published—in both German and English—in recent years, and public discussions and academic debates rage over what it means and has meant to be German, particularly in light of the country’s ignominious recent past. The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have seen no shortage of societal, political, and cultural changes that have contributed to the seemingly constant reshaping of German identity. In addition to the lasting shadow cast by National Socialism and the Holocaust, questions remain surrounding the collapse of the GDR and reunification, debates over German victimization in and after WWII, continuing immigration and increasing multiculturalism, the resurrection of right-wing extremism, globalization, as well as EU enlargement and Germany’s rising clout within that supranational governing body, resulting in profound impacts on how Germans view themselves. Explorations of the various ways writers and moviemakers have rendered the impact of those developments in literature and film are the focus of a recent collection of essays, *Beyond Political Correctness*, edited by Christine Anton and Frank Pilipp. In essence, the book addresses how modern-day Germans—including Jewish-Germans and minorities—are developing future-oriented identities without disregarding their country’s past. In her introductory essay, “Repositioning German Identity,” Anton describes the volume as “[a] compilation of essays about Germany’s quest for a more stable and less contradictory sense of self” (16). Of particular interest to the editors were essays about some of the more controversial aspects of recent discourse on German identity, and the selections were chosen because their far-ranging topics demarcate the latest debates.

Anton’s dual-purpose essay remains truest to the book’s title.
In addition to a brief overview of the volume’s framework, her contribution makes some of the boldest, most politically incorrect assertions of all. For example, signaling her concurrence with the widely held “taboo thesis”—the notion that German wartime suffering had not been discussed, grieved, and commemorated in the postwar decades—she finds “Germany’s new ease with which it approaches its own memories of the collective traumatic events in the latter days of WWII” to be “an encouragement for the nation to engage in a mourning process” (9). Yet she overlooks the pervasive memorialization of German victimization in various guises, including monuments and public commemorative ceremonies, at all levels throughout the Federal Republic in virtually every year since 1945. Writing about the influence of this particular debate on the thorny relationship between Germans and Jews, Anton calls for an “open dialogue that does not perpetuate an endless cycle of blame and apologetic gestures, nor tries to whitewash history or eradicate memory” (10), which in my estimation puts too much of the onus on Jews for repairing ties. In order for Germans to establish a more positive identity, this argument goes, Jews must allow for the inclusion of Germans in some sort of overarching victims collective—something Germans have been doing themselves for decades—even as scholars uncover more and more startling facts about the conduct of “normal Germans” and their involvement in the Holocaust. While few would contest the fact that millions of Germans suffered during WWII, this seems one-sided. Nevertheless, despite the lingering discomfort about the past, Anton is correct in calling for the realization that Germany has long been far from ethnically homogenous and in stating that the country’s present and future—rather than the Nazi past—will be more important for how Germans view and understand themselves in the twenty-first century. What the Nazi past means for modern-day Germans with migratory backgrounds is certainly a fair question.

Has Germany become “normal,” then? Though the book’s tone-setting opening essay seems to call for a normalization of sorts, the other contributions tackle the issue less directly by mapping out the efforts of authors and filmmakers to (re)shape and probe what it
One of this eminently readable book’s strengths is its breadth, which allows for the inclusion of varying perspectives. Heeding Anton’s call for more expansive, future-oriented approaches to German identity—which include but do not overemphasize the atrocities of the Third Reich as a defining attribute—the focus of several of these essays is specifically on second and third-generation Germans, i.e. the descendants of the victims and perpetrators who have no personal experience with the Nazi era, but who nevertheless are indelibly marked by it.

Space concerns prevent an in-depth analysis of each individual piece, but it is safe to say that the authors of these essays would not take great issue with Anton’s eye-catching suggestions. All of them, in fact, seem quite sanguine about the cessation of navel-gazing and the development of a more positive self-image unburdened by the past. One especially noteworthy contribution in that regard is that of Murial Cormican (“Normalization and the Ethics of Holocaust Representation in Vilsmaier’s *Leo und Claire* and *Comedian Harmonists*”), which, as the title indicates, looks at cinematic representation of Jewish experiences in Germany during the Third Reich. The films are not particularly recent (from 2001 and 1997, respectively), an oddity not isolated to this essay; many chapters consider rather dated case studies. These issues, and German identity itself, are constantly evolving.

However, it is a different argument Cormican makes that I find more problematic and which highlights what is at stake in this discussion. She takes to task critics—those “serious scholars, historians, and documentarians who act as the ethics police”—who might see contemporary representations of the Nazi era (again, Cormican was writing specifically about Holocaust films) as “signs of a potentially problematic, self-defensive surge in nationalist sentiment” (140, 139). She continues, “When we read these films as texts that tell us something about contemporary memory making in Germany and its tie to the emergence of a more positive national narrative, we ourselves engage in the construction of yet another German national narrative, one that pathologizes Germans by seeing their interest in remembering the Holocaust as always already suspicious” (140).
One could add German wartime suffering to the last phrase as well. Cormican grants that many of these cultural products are not flawless, but her approach does little in my view to facilitate the development of a more positive German self-understanding. There have certainly been reasons for even casual observers, let alone academics and other commentators, to question how Germans have represented and interpreted their past. Even in the mainstream, some representations have contained self-pitying, even revisionist sentiments that relativize Nazi crimes. Warts and all, according to this logic, consumers of these cultural products must refrain from pointing out “suspicious” elements in order for Germans to move forward less burdened by the past.

Scholars and other critics are not the only roadblocks to a healthier self-understanding, and impugning those who identify troubling aspects in cultural products is not the best solution for striking the delicate balance between awareness of the past, the vigilance required because of that past, and a forward-looking, positive national feeling that embraces multiculturalism and includes Germans of all backgrounds. Until that occurs, German identity will remain as uneasy as ever.

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