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German writers remember 9/11: Katharina Hacker's *The Have Nots*

Franziska Meyer¹

“We might in fact be better off forgetting September 11”

Maja Zehfuss

If there is one recent event which was immediately articulated and interpreted within a transnational framework of remembrance then it is “9/11”. Looking at immediate reactions in the US and other Western countries we see the adoption of a limited number of storylines, by the media, writers and artists. In Germany public demands on authors’ ‘duty’ to become engaged² and to produce the definitive text about 9/11 resemble the call for the definitive novel about the fall of the wall in 1989 – a call which proved to be far from the literary concerns of most German-speaking authors.

The extent to which writers responded to 9/11 with ready-made narratives is remarkable. Most common attempts to comprehend what happened emerge from First World War and Second World War terminology that invokes the assassination of Franz Ferdinand or Pearl Harbour (Dücker 2001). Jonathan Foer’s novel, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), sought parallels between New York and the bombing of Dresden in 1944, while Martin Walser (2001) felt reminded of Hiroshima, which he called “the biggest possible historical atrocity”.³ W.H. Auden’s poem “September 1, 1939” was given new prominence when widely broadcast in the US. References to the Second World War were by

¹ I am grateful for the publisher Walter de Gruyter’s permission to pre-publish this article in the Nottingham ePrint archive (email from editorial director Dr Manuela Gerlof, 28 June 2013). See:

<http://www.degruyter.com/view/product/212389?rskey=H2XvmR&onlyResultQuery=jessica%20rapson>

² Michael Politicky (2001) insisted: “The events were a caesura, and it is a duty for anyone with a heart to get involved.” All translations, if not otherwise stated are mine.

³ See also Alison Kelly’s (2009, 56–57) reference to Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five*.

no means a US phenomenon. “Do we want total war?” (Elfferding, 2001) a German left-wing weekly was entitled, others identified the public mood as being comparable to that of a “Zero Hour” (Schwerfel, 2002). Another popular plot structure was the Holocaust: The French author Frédéric Beigbeder understood the World Trade Center as a “luxury gas chamber” (2003, 334);⁴ a character in Art Spiegelman’s comic, *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004), compared the smell in southern Manhattan with that in Auschwitz; Nikki Moustaki’s (2002) powerful lyrical reply “How to write a poem after September 11th” evoked Theodor W. Adorno’s notion about poetry after Auschwitz. Others turned to another apocalyptic symbol, devoid of any historical and political context, but useful to define the “bigness” of the event: “one should recall the other defining catastrophe from the beginning of the 20th century”, claimed Slavoj Žižek, “that of Titanic” (2002, 15). Alexander Kluge (2004) also identified in this iceberg-accident “a metaphor, a writing on the wall [...] that returned on 9/11”.⁵ And there were those like the Chilean exiled writer Ariel Dorfman (2001a) who warned against the virtual erasure of another 9/11 in public memory, trying to counterbalance a hegemonic media, when they remembered the Chilean military putsch and the US bombardment of Santiago de Chile on 9/11, 1973 – which marked the start of sixteen years of murder and torture of many thousands under a military dictatorship.⁶ A more far-fetched story line, however, to complete these examples, refers to the coincidence of Adorno’s birthday (Mergenthaler 2006).

These few examples show that the “cosmopolisation of memory culture” (as Levy and Sznajder refer to it, 2006) and the new (and old) narratives it gives birth to are no less conflicted or contested than any national or local memory discourse.⁷ For his part, a month after the attack, Eliot Weinberger commented that, “One side believes this war began four weeks ago; the other that it is five hundred years old” (2003, 49).

⁴ For more comprehensive examples, see Ursula Hennigfeld (2009, 189–191).

⁵ See also David Simpson’s critical assessment of the *New York Times*’ “patriotic monumentum” erected in its “Portraits of Grief”: “The event of 9/11 was, it seems, like the sinking of the *Titanic*” (2006, 23, 39–40).

⁶ On Chile and 9/11 as a complex, all-American *lieu de mémoire* see also Rinke (2008). Schmetterling’s (2006) analysis of filmic counter-narratives has provided me with important ideas for this article and complements in several ways my argument.

⁷ For an important overview on recent discussions of the problems of a media induced de-territorialization of the Holocaust and its merger with other catastrophies see Sundquist (2007), esp. his useful discussion of Eva Hoffman’s study (2004).

Each of these images, plot structures and story lines suggests a specific political perspective on the present. The concept of “multidirectional” memory, with its striving to move beyond memory competitions, opens up productive new routes into an intercultural understanding of other peoples’ suffering and transnational modes of remembering. It thus implies, as Michael Rothberg has argued, the “potential” for “new forms of solidarity” (2009a, 5); however, in light of the dominant narratives attached to the New York catastrophe it is of crucial importance to reflect on implicit hierarchies, established by competing memory discourses. Evocation of memories of the same historical event fulfil different functions and have varied effects in different geographical and political contexts. In the US and western Europe the revived commemoration of certain events during the Second World War – circulated by what Marc Redfield (2007, 61) rightly called a “vast representational and commemorative machine” – were now firmly embedded into the story of a nation that claimed victim status. As such it impeded other forms of solidarity with the pain of others, excluding a “common sensing of the vulnerable body”, a “compassion for all victims everywhere”, as David Simpson (2006, 8, 155–156) has requested, in line with Žižek, Judith Butler and several other critical writers

While the dead civilians of the WTC offices soon had to take the place of war victims – see New York Archbishop Edward Egan’s notorious reference to ground zero: “but which I call Ground Hero” (quoted in Zehfuss 2003, 518) – the transnational remembrance of atrocities past helped an instant militarisation and nationalisation of discourse and, ideologically, functioned to pave the way to a “war on terror”. Not least the very name given to the site, borrowed from Hiroshima, successfully overwrote other historical stories (and other nations’ and civilians’ war memories, by delocalising and decontextualising them); it dispatched the horrific war crime of 1945 and replaced it with what happened in 2001.⁸ Simpson’s critical intervention that the “dead look different at different times and in different places” (2006, 32), cannot be underscored often enough; the historical limitations and the Euro-American nature of such a narrow repertoire of repeatedly borrowed atrocities from World War Two also prescribed a dangerously gendered politics of

⁸ See Redfield (2007); on “Pearl Harbor” see also Simpson (2006, 43–44).

commemoration that took, as E. Ann Kaplan noted, a “largely masculine form” (quoted in Kauffman 2009, 651).⁹

And there was another powerful plot structure: the rhetoric of ‘nothing will ever be the same’. The devastating trope of a caesura or an originary creation instantly excluded and effaced other narratives; against the context of a frozen, iconic imagery of the *falling* (but not fallen) towers, discursive strategies of an “outrageous exceptionalism” (Simpson 2006, 44) functioned as the *sine qua non* to enforce the public forgetting of any historical and political contexts or pretexts.¹⁰ In an environment already accustomed to creationist thinking, writers also adopted a rhetorical figure of origin: Paul Auster (2002, 35) proclaimed, “And so the twenty-first century finally begins”; while in Germany, the poet Durs Grünbein announced the “official end of the cold war” (2001,17).¹¹

To relate to and to remember historical events, concerns less the status of empiricist claims, as Michael Rothberg argues in dialogue with Dirk Moses in this volume, than the perception of simultaneous historical realities and the question who is accorded a voice to express them and, crucially, who is listened to. Whilst Siri Hustvedt (2002, 158–159) recalled other non-European atrocities, like the “Belgian Congo, Cambodia, My Lai, Sarajevo, Rwanda”, and Dorfman (2001b) appealed not to forget “multiple variations of the many September 11ths”, such voices had diminishing chances to be heard in an increasingly violent discursive environment whose commandment was, “you shall have no other September 11ths; should you mention others, they will be secondary to this absolute, toxic punctum: if you wish, say, to refer to Chile, you will have to speak of ‘the other September 11’” (Redfield 2007, 59).¹² However, writers’ actual *literary* replies were far more complex. Several German speaking authors, employing the most diverse aesthetic means, challenged

⁹ See also Susan Faludi’s (2008) feminist intervention and discussion of masculinities.

¹⁰ For the media production of “empty empathy” and an important consideration of other writers’ perspectives that rightly understood 9/11 as “a repetition of the terrorism that is routine nearly everywhere else” – albeit in the absence of TV cameras – see Kauffman (2009, 650, 657); see also Žižek (2002, 56): “America’s peace was bought by the catastrophes going on elsewhere”. On the “narrative dangers” of a photographic substitution and fixing of events through emptied imagery when producing collective memories of atrocities, see Michael Bernard-Donals (2004, 399).

¹¹ For an analysis of US writers’ critical literary reactions to the event see Kelly (2009).

¹² So we should remember other post 1945 “name-dates” (Redfield), that implicate different local and national memories of massacre, and people’s unresolved fear, grief and conflict, for example: 12/3 1984 Bhopal; 5/8 1945 Sétif; 10/2 1968 Tlatelolco; 10/17 1961 Paris.

what Susan Sontag (2001) called a “reality-concealing rhetoric”, and belied voices which perceived 9/11 as a terrorist attempt on literary fantasy.¹³

To extend the dialogue this volume establishes between Dirk Moses, Michael Rothberg and Terri Tomsy, just as transcultural analysis can challenge what are often nationalised, narcissistic master narratives of remembrance, so the literary texts by Katharina Hacker or the Yugoslav author, Dubravka Ugresić, can reshape public narratives and intervene in hegemonic modes of perceiving and narrating the past. This article intends to show how Katharina Hacker’s award-winning *Die Habenichtse* intervenes in and offers a counter-memory to supposedly global versions and memories of 9/11. Published in 2006 it won the German Bookprize and immediately became a bestseller (Hacker 2006; *The Have-Nots*, 2008).¹⁴ The first part of my analysis will introduce the novel; the second part will suggest that Hacker’s engagement with certain aspects of Walter Benjamin’s understanding of remembrance helps to throw a different light on the perception of overbearing narratives of catastrophe.

Set in Berlin and London, this 9/11 novel refuses to enter New York at all. It follows a heterosexual middle-class couple in their mid thirties to the UK, unfolding a palimpsest of individual stories which touch upon Europe’s fascist and post war history, on Germany after 1989 and the UK after September 2001, on the lives of London Arabs, and British and Hungarian Jews. The novel unfolds a broad social, political and historical horizon. On at least three different time levels Hacker’s text integrates: the mundane everyday life of the inhabitants of one London street; the past with its shattered biographies of those who were split from their former life through persecution, and the cold war; on a larger scale, the global impact of a country preparing for war and the ways that international policies infiltrate the life of the Londoners.

¹³ Among others the Syrian exile Rafik Schami (*Mit fremden Augen. Tagebuch über den 11. September, den Palästina-Konflikt und die arabische Welt*, 2002), the East German Kerstin Hensel (with Dagmar Leupold and Marica Bodrožić: *11.9. – 9 11. Bilder des neuen Jahrhunderts*, 2002), the West German Ulrich Peltzer (*Bryant Park*, 2002), and the Austrian Kathrin Röggla (*really ground zero. 11. september und folgendes*, 2001). Thomas Lehr’s novel *September. Fata Morgana* (2010), was published after this article was written. Nearly 10 years after the event it confronts in a truly transnational perspective the sorrow of an American and Iraqi father whose daughters fell victim to 9/11 and American war terrorism. See also Reinhäkel (2009); Irsigler (2008); Lorenz (2004).

¹⁴ Henceforth all page references to the English version in the text.

The protagonists, Isabelle, a graphic designer, and Jakob, a lawyer, move from Berlin to London in 2003 shortly before the start of the Iraq war. Jakob, who escaped the New York catastrophe by one day and who profits personally from the death of his colleague Robert in the towers, is working for a lawyer's office that deals with cases of restitution of former Jewish property. In its political references to the most prominent restitution cases which garnered international media attention in 2003 and 2006, the novel also challenges strategies of public forgetting.¹⁵

There is Jakob's boss, Bentham, who arrived in London on a Kindertransport and who is mourning the untimely death of his boyfriend in an accident. There is Isabelle's Jewish colleague Andras in Berlin, whose parents sent him from Budapest to West Berlin as a teenager in the early 1980s. Torn between Hungary and Germany, and secretly in love with Isabelle, Andras is puzzled by her "implacable aimlessness" (130).

In contrasting the couple's everyday life with their impoverished North London neighbourhood or London gay culture, Hacker slowly unwraps the listless attitudes of her prosperous protagonists. Class and class divisions are at the centre of this London world – in a milieu of violence, domestic and drug abuse, 25 year old Mae, dependent on narcotics and prescription drugs, vanishes after a brutal knife attack by her jealous boyfriend Jim, a drug dealer. Jim and Isabelle start a kind of affair, and Jakob feels sexually attracted to his boss, Bentham, while also having an affair with another woman. The reader follows Jim's desperate search through London for Mae, a woman he fears dead and whose face he had disfigured. Next door to Isabelle and Jakob lives an impoverished family, Dave and his little sister, Sara, who has stopped growing and is locked into the house; mentally disabled and abused, prevented from going to school, Sara is nearly starved by her parents.

The stories of these drugdealers, graphic designers, burglars, neglected youngsters and lawyers and their respective entourages are intermingled in a complex way. The *Have-Nots* is a novel of psychological cruelty and violence, a city novel and a book of mourning. In its broader social perspectives Hacker's novel is by no means a portrait of "a" generation – as it

¹⁵ Such as the restitution of the Seehof plots (201); or of the former *Wertheim* land in Leipziger Straße/Potsdamer Platz, which is now the Beisheim Center, owned by and named after Otto Beisheim, the former SS man who is suspected of having been a member of Hitler's Leibstandarte (203). See Köhler (2005) and Padtberg (2005); for the history of the Seehof plots, see "Jewish Family Wins Landmark Legal Battle" (2003).

was labelled in the the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Meller 2006) – nor does it contribute to the German literary memorial boom of the family novel or “turn toward the domestic” (Rothberg 2009b, 153–155), as was a tendency in US post 9/11 fiction. While Hacker’s *Have-Nots* are shown as not in command of their own “strangely lifeless” (54) biographies, the text never loses sight of the fact that there are other horizons beyond the world (views) of its main protagonists. Hacker’s narrative refuses to privilege one particular perspective; the text coerces its diverse characters into collision (even though they do not necessarily meet) via chance encounters or attacks on the streets: peeping on London’s cruising grounds, confronting neighbours, or eavesdropping on each other. While some characters move into focus to take centre stage, others, though present and looking on, retreat into the background (for which one critic compared the text to Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg Ohio*). These mutual perceptions of each other are often in sharp contrast, and can have a disturbing effect as the narrative ‘forces’ the reader into a constantly shifting point of view. Hacker’s cartographies of London and Berlin point to unremarkable corners of the cities Berlin Schöneberg, Kentish Town, and Kings Cross (the latter already associated with catastrophe, the tube fire in 1987, and London’s so-called 7/7 – where the bombers arrived). These mundane perspectives remain strictly at street level and offer no guidance or control to their city walkers. Hacker’s London streets are places of sudden encounters, where people lose their way; they are spaces of attack and the unexpected but also of boredom and uncanniness. The often empty streets produce lonely and faint figures, standing in the distance, waving towards somewhere, a waving that is only noticed but not responded to.

9/11 is at best tangible only at the narrative’s margins. Its horrific geopolitical consequences, on the other hand, provide a constant backdrop. Mae, lying crying at home, is haunted not by the infinite loop of fixed television imagery of 9/11, but by the aftermath of the planes’ impact. Hacker’s text is taking time and giving space to Mae’s own imagination of the actual people,

she could still see the dead people and the live ones jumping from the windows into the abyss, she could hear their screams, she could hear what the people trapped in the lifts and the corridors were saying. [...] how could we not have known that they

hated us from the depths of their souls? (34)¹⁶

The Iraq war is imminent and state anti-terrorist measures complement the everyday racism against non-white Arabic-looking Londoners. The novel thus unites the falling people from the towers and the victims of American bombs – like the “human scarifies hobbling on the stumps of their legs around Baghdad or New York” (268). Hacker’s text oscillates between the everyday that is happening before Isabelle’s and Jakob’s eyes, and global politics; the Have-Nots only respond to the latter, expressing vague feelings of an amorphous lurking danger:

How quiet it is on a Sunday, Isabelle said to Jakob, [...] the whole city is so peaceful. Jakob nodded, but they were just passing one of the CCTV cameras: this was the new Europe, subject to surveillance, prepared and counting the days, Jakob thought [...]. Were they safe? [...] The threat was just another charade like Bush on his war ship. (226)

Not knowing what is going on, caught in an atmosphere of political hysteria, insecurity and disbelief, but above all caught in their mindsets of incessant indecision, of “maybes” and “perhapses”, Hacker’s protagonists stop short of exploration or engagement. The ongoing abuse of the neighbours’ daughter is only perceived by Isabelle as “something [that] was hurled against the wall”, while she stares in horror:

Perhaps there was a thin voice making a humming sound, but perhaps it was some other sound. From outside, far away, an aircraft, a small aircraft on its approach to somewhere. No fire engine came around the corner, nothing happened. A door slammed. Isabelle switched on the radio. Desert Storm, you couldn’t see a yard in front of you, and so all traces were obliterated, “embedded journalism” was the buzzword, but you still didn’t get to know what was going on. (173–174)

The brutal, and only direct, encounter that the little girl Sara has with her German neighbour forms one of the key scenes, at the end of which the girl is forgotten and left to fend for herself all night in the garden. Sara’s single escape from the house, in search of her

¹⁶ On the perception and politics of time and counter-narratives, that aimed to pay tribute to the “realtime qualities of the deaths of those in the towers” in contrast to media versions of a “cartoonlike immediacy of the collapsing towers”, see also Simpson (2006, 102).

cat, exposes her to Isabelle's gaze from a window into a garden that "was strewn with rubbish and old toys, the terrace cluttered with beer bottles and kitchen equipment [...] Detritus, bags crammed with waste, and the child was shamming dead, like an animal" (252). The scene unfolds the most mundane catastrophe of negligence and indifference: "This could be anywhere, [Isabelle] thought, Bosnia, Baghdad, it was always the obverse of her own life" (254). Her "eye rested without sympathy on the bare strip of childish flesh. [...] What a farce, thought Isabelle, how stupid of me to get involved" (252, 255). Sara is left in "speechless horror" (252) and literally in a pile of debris, this encounter having belied her hopes when they moved into their new flat: "Everything will be different now" (11), she is told in the opening sentence of the novel by her brother Dave, in a clear comment on 9/11 discourse. A comment it is, but one which only undermines this very figure of speech, pointing 250 pages later at the permanence of Sara's damaged life, which is governed by neglect and broken promises.¹⁷ Andras in Berlin refers dryly to other historical continuities: "Do you remember", he writes to Isabelle in London, "what Bush said, that nothing is the way it was? Heerstrasse does not seem to have changed since the thirties, nor does the woodland cemetery. All unchanged" (217–218).

In a wealth of intertextual references Hacker pays respect to a certain (humanist) tradition of engaged German post war writing, replying to Uwe Johnson (220) and Marie Luise Kaschnitz (213). There are references to Bertolucci and Shakespeare as well as Shaw's *Pygmalion* and Günter Grass's *Tin Drum*. However, Mae, the object of her boyfriend's rage, who has taken to the streets of London to sell flowers, will not grow accustomed to her mutilated face. Here, in Hackers' London streets, the romanticised character of the poor flower girl is giving way to a "gaunt" bearer of a marked face, who suddenly appears in Isabelle's way: "fiery red, ugly [...] branded by the viciousness that ruined human faces. But perhaps it was an accident, Isabelle thought" (198). Nor could Sara, the little girl who does not grow and who is used as a human drum by her father, ever qualify here, in Hacker's arrangement, to take the narrative stage: forgotten and speechless as they are, these distorted figures are waiting to be seen and recognized.

¹⁷ But see Fromholzer (2008).

To be seen and recognized: it is in this constellation that Hacker's novel enters into dialogue with Walter Benjamin. Benjamin's hunchback – das Bucklicht Männlein –, his "prototype of distortion" (Benjamin 2005, 811),¹⁸ populates Hacker's text to remind these Have-Nots of things forgotten: "Whoever is looked at by this little man pays no attention", says Benjamin: "Either to himself or to the little man. He stands dazed before a heap of fragments" (Benjamin 2006, 121). We find this uncannily watching dwarf in Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood*, in *On the Concept of History* and in his essays on Kafka.¹⁹ Here, in the novel it is Sara, who takes the place of the un-recognised dwarf, while the Have-Nots are passing by, trying "to evade that insistent stare" (252). On Isabelle's arrival in London Jakob "was relieved that outside [...] the little girl had not appeared, hunchback-like, creepy". And later he is only happy to "stop thinking about the neighbours' little girl, whose pale face he found so disturbing: his route between home and the office was different now, no hunchback popping up, and his life was that of a married man" (trans. modified 134, 137). Little Sara is for Jim "an ugly little thing with stubborn eyes", whom he "must get away from" (267), who serves as a messenger from the realm of oblivion – evoking uncanny reminders of "something mean", like the "girl in the red coat" in "that film *Don't Look Now*" (252). Isabelle's exit from the theatre where she has seen *King Lear* is "intercepted [...] by the Fool, a short, grim-faced man, [...] muttering, muttering, standing close behind her, for she could not run away, she wanted to go ahead but did not dare" (192). And as the fool in *Lear* reminds the King of that which he should know but which he wilfully ignores, here the disturbing presence of Hacker's distorted figures serve as a creepy and urgent reminder of a past that is not relieved – obstructing Isabelle's and the other Have-Nots' way into the future. "The little hunchback, too, is something that has been forgotten, something we once used to know; he was then at peace with himself, but now he blocks our way to the future", writes Benjamin (2005, 499). To read Hacker's novel against Benjamin proves productive in several ways (Fromholzer 2008; Apel 2006). The text zooms into the apathetic lives of her wealthy protagonists who refuse, in Benjamin's sense, the attentiveness for the broken and violated biographies that surround them.

¹⁸ The literature on Benjamin is vast; my argument owes many stimuli to Fioretis (1995), Santner (2006), and Thielen (2005).

¹⁹ The figure of the hunchback stems from a children's poem, collected by the German romantics, Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano in *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (1808); but there is of course a far older tradition. See Haider (2003).

In an article in honour of her friend Saul Friedländer (and his award of the Peace Prize of the German book trade), Hacker referred to Benjamin's "Angel of History" and stressed the importance of Benjamin for her work. Respect, caution, care and tenderness²⁰ – these attitudes Hacker attributed to the work of Friedländer. Respect, caution, care and attentiveness – which Benjamin ascribes to Kafka (2005, 812) – are also at the center of Hacker's poetics of remembering. At stake are forgetfulness, guilt and negligence. Hacker exposes her characters to an environment where their tiny deeds do not go unnoticed but are carefully registered. "But everything is recorded, whether anybody knows about it or not – and I saw you", Jim, the drug dealer, confronts Isabelle, after she has disposed of Sara's cat in a gesture of "fury and disgust", and has "slammed the window shut and turned away" (278). The strength of Hacker's text lies in its attention to minute detail, in her microanalysis of human encounters and fractures in the everyday. The emphasis on the quotidian may lead the reader to see similarities with Ian McEwan's 9/11 London novel, *Saturday*. But *The Have-Nots'* multidirectional perspectives and gender politics, and its exposure of everyday male violence against female bodies in contrast to *Saturday's* sensationalist event that closes the novel (which is almost inevitably a rape scene) set the politics of the two novels apart.

If it is elsewhere so extremely loud, the slow medium of literature can provide other portraits of grief, and a counter-narrative to the big storylines which govern hegemonic strategies of public remembering. Again, it is productive to borrow from Benjamin's aesthetics of the concrete, which is first and foremost an aesthetics of recognition.

In calling for attentiveness, and an aesthetics that strives for the recognizability of the pain of others, Hacker's novel forms part of a broader transcultural tendency of an aesthetics of remembrance and commitment that suggests a decisive change in perspective. In taking longer, slower and closer views, these literary texts repudiate complicity with rhetorical constructions of "turning points in history" or universalising versions of catastrophes. In so doing, they provoke a different way of seeing that allows engagement

²⁰ "Achtung, Behutsamkeit, Sorge und Zärtlichkeit" (Hacker 2007).

and empathy, connecting the reader to an ethical dimension of transculturality that David Simpson outlined in his powerful plea for “Taking Time” (2006, 1–20).²¹

This aesthetics of commitment takes the reader into a past which Benjamin called a construction site, a past which holds as yet undetected encounters with people who are looking at us and have not been seen yet. By inviting us to turn our gazes towards them this narrative strategy draws Hacker closer to claims for a transcultural, anti-national politics of remembrance and the interconnectedness of similar situations of suffering, made by authors and artists as geographically disparate as the Asian, Arundhati Roy, the Europeans, Christian Boltanski, José Saramago, Claudio Magris, or Dubravka Ugresić, or the Latin American, Ariel Dorfman.

When receiving the Peace Prize of the German book trade in 2009, the Italian author Claudio Magris referred to 9/11 as part of a linear tendency which connected the “bloodbath in Biafra” with the “disaster in Bhopal” and advocated the “greatest possible dialogue” with others. Referring to his government’s treatment of African refugees Magris spoke of the duty to remember violence and its victims, by calling on writers’ responsibility not to become complicit in killing victims a second time by forgetting them (Magris 2009a, 75; 2009b). For his part the Portuguese writer José Saramago embedded the horror of the individual dying at the twin towers into a globalised, transcultural, but anti-national remembrance of horrific deaths inflicted on people by war and torture (Saramago 2001).²² This is reminiscent of Christian Boltanski’s projects of retrieval of the dead in which the French artist directs our gaze to tiny traces of things usually unnoticed and forgotten, but which point harrowingly at people being absent. “Even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins”, says Benjamin (2003, 390). “And the dead people that we’ve forgotten”, replies Hacker’s Mae, “they’re calling us” (34).

Hacker’s novel seeks another stark affiliation to Benjamin’s Angel and his concept of messianic time. Throughout the novel, we are shown how her Have-Nots fail to seize hold of the things that matter, or in Benjamin’s words, to gain the “true picture of the past” (2003,

²¹ For the increasing impact of transcultural terminology on recent literary studies see Schulze-Engler’s insightful introduction (Schulze-Engler and Sissy Helff 2008, 10–17).

²² On the exchange of glances in solidarity cf also Saramago’s blog “Kissing Names”, 12 March 2009 (Saramago 2010, 196).

390). Indecisive as they are, the Have-Nots – whose sense of the future is as empty as their present – find themselves confronted by an ever growing past, “like an unwelcome guest”: “like an old cat [...] grown to an inordinate size [...] sprawling gigantically on the table or the bed [...] that would have driven one away if only one had known where to go” (220). However, in an instant that interrupts their empty present, there appears a hint of something that might be grasped, before it “threatens to disappear irretrievably” (Benjamin 2003, 390). Jim, Jakob and Isabelle are repeatedly overcome by sudden flashes of light, which “cut across the placid succession of things” (195): “Wasn’t there a tiny crack opening up there, a shift that provoked unease and curiosity [...]?”, Isabelle is “thinking intently, as if she needed to discover what it was that had revealed itself for an instant” (195). And Jim’s “desperation [...] was no more than a fine crack and then suddenly hurt, like a knife [...] cutting out memory. [...] In that crack there was always a light too, a dazzling brightness” (117). While Jim fails to “grab”, what is “only a hand’s breadth away from him” (269), Jakob “almost collided with somebody whose light-colored anorak came out of nowhere with the suddenness of a flash bulb going off, making Jakob blink, and the man hissed something with such venom that he was momentarily alarmed” (127).

Momentarily, in the blink of an eye, Hacker’s characters are close to seeing – or making – a difference. In its attention to small things and what Benjamin once called the “tiny, fragile human body” (2002, 144), the text’s perspective focuses on cracks and gaps, which carry the potential to make all the difference: This ‘it should be otherwise’ – Benjamin’s “weak Messianic power” (Benjamin 2003, 390) lies dormant around the distorted lives the novel presents – if only “slight adjustments” were made. The hunchback, Benjamin writes, “[t]his little man is at home in distorted life; he will disappear with the coming of the Messiah, who (a great rabbi once said) will not wish to change the world by force but will merely make a slight adjustment in it” (Benjamin 2005, 811). In contrast to the *caesura* announced so portentously at the time of 9/11, Hacker’s text is at pains to show the slight and fleeting ways that the past can interrupt the present.

Writing against the confiscation of memories, Hacker and the Yugoslav Dubravka Ugresić share many similarities. Their texts transcend notions of discrete cultures. In their perspectives on dislocation, their attentiveness to other histories, and their creation of other, often unnoticed, mnemonic spaces, both Ugresić and Hacker rupture – in a

Benjaminian sense, and in the words of Tomski – “the continuum of historical forgetfulness”. In so doing they create a new, literary space of transcultural “differentiated solidarity” (Michael Rothberg in dialogue with Dirk Moses).

Hacker’s novel redirects attention to the distorted ‘others’, insisting on the interconnectedness of simultaneous realities. In refusing totalising reflexes of a collective “We”, this literary response to 9/11 insists that we can remember differently.

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