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Citation for published version:

Bauer, K, Haines, B, Mallet, M & Watson, J 2020, 'Introduction: Herta Müller and the currents of European history', *German Life and Letters*, vol. 73, no. 1, pp. 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.1111/glal.12257>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1111/glal.12257](https://doi.org/10.1111/glal.12257)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

German Life and Letters

Publisher Rights Statement:

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HERTA MÜLLER AND THE CURRENTS OF EUROPEAN HISTORY

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Ten years on from the award of the Nobel Prize in Literature and twenty years after German reunification and the fall of the Ceausescu regime in Romania is a fitting moment to revisit Herta Müller's work and place it within broader intellectual, geographical, and historical horizons than has hitherto been attempted. It is also time to reconcile the public intellectual with the literary author. For it has long been clear that Müller's aesthetically innovative and highly acclaimed novels, essays, and collages stand as a testament to the major upheavals of twentieth-century European history. Drawing on her Romanian-German upbringing, overshadowed by the Second World War and Stalin-era deportations, and on her adult negotiation of the oppression of Romanian communism and the shock of arrival in 1980s West Berlin, Müller has created a body of work which thematises guilt, trauma, alienation, flight, and resistance. Her works concern themselves with the experiences of common people – often at the margins of society or excluded from the narratives of political history yet caught up in historical currents – and promote awareness of the huge cost in terms of suffering and upheaval paid by them for the decisions made by their rulers. Yet Müller's self-adopted role as moral voice and her willingness to make broad historical comparisons over the past three decades have often met with controversy. Her outspokenness in criticising European governments for their hypocrisy and negligence with regard to human rights abuses have, for example, found relatively little resonance, while her attacks on the failure of nations such as Romania and Serbia to process the history of dictatorship have made her the focus of vicious criticism and coordinated smear campaigns. The broad relevance of Müller's ethical and political concerns – central, we argue here, to both her literary work and her public statements – has been underestimated in both the feuilleton and scholarly criticism in favour of a focus on the historical interest of her life under Romanian communism. But her warnings regarding the vulnerability of the West's post-war settlement, denazification and the stability of Europe, received by some as tiresome ten years ago, are, at the time of writing, thrown into sharp relief by the greatest humanitarian crisis Europe has faced since 1945

– the so-called refugee crisis – and by the global rise of populism. Put plainly, the complacency that might previously have allowed Müller’s interventions on the topics of xenophobia, nationalism, flight, and expulsion to be regarded as pertaining solely to Europe’s pre-1989 history is no longer sustainable.

Müller’s engagement with the fate of refugees, for example, which has seen her ‘triangulate’ the experiences of German Jews, ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe, refugees from communism, and dissidents such as Liu Xiaobo, is particularly pertinent in a context in which mass flight has returned to the European mainland.¹ The work of German-Jewish author Carl Zuckmayer, whose poems she discovered in a second-hand book shop in Timișoara as a young woman, allowed her to appreciate her own experience of oppression and flight in a broader context. His identification of chance as a key factor in his survival – Zuckmayer narrowly managed to cross the Austrian border to Switzerland in 1938 – is one that Müller returned to in a 2018 speech to the PEN Zentrum deutschsprachiger Autoren im Ausland in which she focused on the unknown people who never manage to become refugees: ‘Exil immerhin bedeutet, ein Land verlassen zu können’.² Müller sees herself as someone who escaped many potentially worse fates and is dedicated to drawing attention to those who were lost in the currents of history which provide the backdrop of her writing and thought.

But Müller does not just bear witness, she intervenes, warns, and mobilises. In early 2019 she joined twenty-five prominent intellectuals, among them Mario Vargas Llosa, Svetlana Alexievich, Anne Applebaum, Ismaïl Kadare, and Peter Schneider, in adding her name to a widely translated open letter published in the left-wing French magazine *Libération*. Penned by philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy, the piece called on ‘those who still believe in the legacy of Erasmus, Dante, Goethe and Comenius’ to act to prevent the ‘explosions of xenophobia and antisemitism’ that the undersigned predicted would be the result of populist gains in the 2019 European Elections, and identified in the political climate of the late 2010s ‘a challenge greater than any since the 1930s: a challenge to liberal democracy and its values’.³ Müller here seems tentatively willing to recognise the flawed and morally compromised Europe of the centrist orthodoxy as the best of all available options in a time of crisis, while maintaining her right always to call out perceived wrongdoing by the establishment.

As a writer, witness and public intellectual – these aspects being indivisible – Müller thus speaks directly to readers concerned with pressing issues of humanity, freedom, and justice

in the turbulent modern world. Examining Müller's challenge to both German and Romanian memory cultures and her intellectual affinities with other currents in twentieth and twenty-first-century literature and thought reveals how her work, while deeply rooted in particular experiences and places, transcends time and space and inspires an ethical connection with individual readers. The articles assembled here explore how these challenges and affinities are expressed through Müller's singular aesthetics, including her use of metaphor, fragmentation, and collage. Common to all is the understanding that Müller's *oeuvre* constitutes a profound anti-totalitarian strategy of resistance in narrative form. She uses her writing and international prominence as an author and Nobel Prize winner to challenge categorical thinking, hegemonic discourses, and received wisdom, and to agitate for ethical engagement with the experience of the Other.

Our special issue draws on the intellectually stimulating corpus of Müller scholarship already in existence, some of which was published in this very journal. Essay collections from the 1990s, such as Norbert Otto Eke's *Die erfundene Wahrnehmung: Annäherung an Herta Müller* (1991) and Brigid Haines's *Herta Müller* (1998), studies deploying trauma as a conceptual framework such as Lyn Marven's *Body and Narrative: Herta Müller, Libuse Monikova, and Kerstin Hensel* (2005), and the more recent volumes edited by Bettina Brandt and Valentina Glajar, *Herta Müller: Politics and Aesthetics* (2013) and Haines and Marven's *Herta Müller* (2013) have been seminal in furthering the scholarly dialogue on Müller's work. As the recent publication of Eke's *Herta Müller-Handbuch* (2017) has shown, the complexity of Müller's texts has given rise to an ever-expanding and diversifying corpus of research publications.⁴ The authors of this collection of articles acknowledge their indebtedness to previous research, while seeking not only to broaden the theoretical approaches, but also, importantly, to build bridges between them. The editors do not subscribe to particular or singular approaches. On the contrary, what has made the collaboration on this volume so exciting has been the engagement with the multiple perspectives proposed by the authors who build connections across theoretical divides, creating a web of complementary and interconnecting methodologies within and across the articles. The necessity of such a flexible approach to theory reflects the challenge posed by those elements of Müller's writing that defy straightforward description even after thirty years of valuable scholarly analysis.

Scholarly literature that has appeared since 2009 shows a renewed focus on language as a theme in Müller's writing. Previous work that identified her preoccupation with the insufficiency of language along deconstructivist lines has been extended and complemented by research into the influence of Romanian idioms and semantic relationships on her creation of metaphors (Alex Drace-Francis, 2013), the indebtedness of her thought to post-war German 'Sprachkritik' (Jenny Watson, 2014), and the psychological functions of metaphor (Pavlo Shopin, 2014) among many other fresh approaches. Work on the literary significance and thematic preoccupations of *Atemschaukel* (2009) has cemented the relevance of Holocaust Studies to interpretations of Müller's writing, drawing on the comparisons with Primo Levi (Bannasch, 2010) and Paul Celan (Roxane Compagne, 2010) to expand our understanding of her texts. There has also been a significant increase in publications on Müller's early works and the context in which she became a writer, most notably by Julia Müller (2014) and Olivia Spiridon (2014).⁵ Important in this regard have been institutions such as the Institut für die Geschichte und Kultur Südosteuropas (Munich) and the Institut für donauschwäbische Geschichte und Landeskunde (Tübingen), whose efforts to document the German-Romanian literary scene and champion its representatives have been instrumental in furthering the understanding both of her work and of ethnic German culture. This engagement, combined with the work of Romanian scholars employed abroad and the surge in scholarly interest in Müller in Romania itself since 2009, has done much to improve what had been a Western-dominated critical literature and an at times troublingly undifferentiated view of life under Romanian communism. The still-developing historiography of Romania, as well as of the Eastern bloc more broadly, is also undoubtedly relevant in this context.

The award of the Nobel Prize propelled Müller into the canon of world literature and has provided an impetus for nuanced and careful assessments of her work. The early reception in both Romania and Germany had been sparse and cool due to her Romanian-German heritage and to the subject matter that was often regarded with suspicion by German and Romanian critics and publics alike. Her portrayal of life in Ceausescu's Romania and the German enclave where she grew up was regarded as out of touch with contemporary German culture, while in Romania she was mostly ignored or rebuked as a 'Nestbeschmutzerin'. Her unique style and use of language – with its Romanian influences – often went unrecognized for its literary innovation, and her focus on detail and fragment was often misunderstood as obfuscation or the excessive introspection so

often ascribed to women authors. Our interest today lies in gaining a fuller understanding of how Müller's 'memories from the margins' are positioned to disrupt master narratives of German and Romanian memory culture. Connecting the detailed stylistic analysis of Müller's writing to broader scholarly concerns of memory culture and intellectual heritage, our special issue highlights these disruptions. As scholarly horizons extend over time it has become easier to recognise the global significance and impact of her work and – while not overlooking her singular origins – what is universal and enduring about it. The contributions to this special issue are able to shed light on the complexity of Müller's *oeuvre* by drawing on a broad variety of scholarly approaches to autofictionality, trauma and symptomatological readings, witness narratives, linguistic analyses of conceptual metaphors, analyses of memory work, and the aesthetics and poetics of collage, while also expanding the conceptual frameworks in the hope that this collection will inspire new avenues of investigation in the future.

The concerns and topics shared amongst the contributions collected here are many; however, one of the most prominent common threads consists of attempts to parse Müller's anti-totalitarian aesthetics. What emerges from Müller's work is a wider European and, indeed, global concern with the defence of freedom, democracy, and human rights. Müller's poetics of fragmentation, non-identity, and deterritorialisation, and the undecidability underlying her works all constitute a profound anti-totalitarian impulse: content and form converge in ever-new constellations. The technique of collage is central to an understanding of Müller's prose and the aesthetic strategies of resistance against totalitarian structures; it is more than an artistic technique, it is a mode of thought and representation that lies at the very heart of the project of resisting the imposition of totalising discourses and structures.

The first two essays in this volume show how Müller challenges German and Romanian memory cultures respectively. Karin Bauer draws out the ethical implications of Müller's deterritorialising labour of memory in her texts, as well as her public interventions. Müller's memories are disruptive to totalising discourses precisely because they are multidirectional and cosmopolitan – to use Michael Rothberg's, and Natan Sznajder and Daniel Levy's terms respectively – and thereby invite new forms of solidarity that move beyond narrowly defined national, ethnic, and cultural contexts. Similarly to Brigid Haines's article which concludes this special issue, Bauer highlights the ethical dimension of Müller's work, not only in her writing, but in her public engagement where she speaks out for the rights of migrants, the oppressed, and

the disenfranchised.

Dana Bizuleanu and Marius Conkan examine Müller's uncomfortable reception in Romania, how she turns communist Romanian space into a mental space, and how this temporal and spacial framing of anguish and terror is negotiated in post-communist society today. They contend that the recurring, displaced, and reframed images create a multilayered web of imagery that reflects the contradictions of life under totalitarianism. The 'transfer-images' – images transferred from one text and context to another – intertwine in a rhizomatic manner, resonating not only with Hannah Vinter's examination of assemblage, but also with the notion of multidirectional memory with which several authors engage.

Jenny Watson examines the trope of denaturalisation and, based on Griselda Pollock and Max Silverman's theory of concentrationary memory, she explicates the copious concentrationary imagery of Müller's work. Watson argues that Müller's use of the existing image repertoires of the collective historical imaginary – most obvious in relation to the history of the Holocaust – allow her to extend the reach and power of her imaginary universe at the level of both narrative and metaphor. Her ability to create resonances across time and space is predicated upon the accumulation of meaning in the visual realm and extends beyond objects and symbols into gesture, sensation, and affect. Müller's preoccupation with 'obscene consumption' – the subversion and denaturalisation of food and eating – provides a wealth of examples for exploring these dimensions of her work.

There follow four papers which examine Müller's aesthetics of fragmentation, linking them to broader historical, political, and ethical concerns. Norbert Otto Eke reminds us that Müller explicitly eschews authenticity in favour of fictionality, while insisting that – despite the fallibility of memory – truth can be ascertained through fiction. As Eke's close readings of passages from Müller's texts illustrate, fictional truths may be constructed and may function differently in different narrative contexts, but they do not lose their truth content or become less true. While Müller does not attempt to universalise her experiences or her invented perceptions, at the core of her work, Eke finds, similarly to Bauer's contribution, an abiding and encompassing concern with humanity, freedom, and universal justice.

Utilising Michel Foucault's concept of the panoptic gaze and W.J.T. Mitchell's notion of the 'hypericon', Michel Mallet investigates recurring images of shine and glitter connected to state surveillance and oppression in Müller's under-researched novel *Der Fuchs war damals schon der*

Jäger. By exploring the use of imagery in the representation of political and psychic terror, he probes how Müller's texts portray the effects of the abuses of power on its victims, and shows how visual details found within Müller's verbal imagery function as defence mechanisms used to ward off and undermine totalitarian ideologies. Like Watson, Mallet emphasises the dimensions of the visual beyond objects in his consideration of qualities such as reflectivity, smoothness, and intensity of colour.

The two papers on Müller's masterpiece, *Atemschaukel*, complement each other in exploring the novel's origins and effects. Drawing on Giorgio Agamben's concept of 'zones of indistinction', Mette Leonard Hoeeg investigates the discursive function of Müller's memory in terms of a refusal to construct univocal narratives. She examines Müller's narrative construction of zones of indistinction that challenge the reader to accept unresolved tensions and undecidability. Like Hoeeg, Hannah Vinter focuses on *Atemschaukel* to examine the narrative strategies used to undermine master narratives of ideology, and similarly to Haines and Bauer who draw attention to the significance of collage for Müller's writings, Vinter utilizes Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's notion of 'assemblage' to shed light on Müller's engagement with the poet Oskar Pastior and the genesis of this, Müller's latest novel.

Brigid Haines explores the intellectual kinship of Müller and Hannah Arendt arising, too, from a shared experience of totalitarianism and emigration, and thereby situates Müller's work within longer trends in twentieth and twenty-first century European history and thought. Müller's and Arendt's works both explore the mechanisms of oppression under totalitarian rule, and, more importantly, suggest potential scope for individual and political possibility. Making fruitful use of Arendt's notion of natality – the unique newness which enters the world with each human birth – , Haines maintains that both Müller and Arendt release the potential to rescue provide moments of illumination for humanity during dark times through awakening and provoking the unpredictable judgement and thought of their audiences.

Besides the theoretical approaches of Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, Arendt, and Agamben, the burgeoning field of memory studies is here productively engaged to advance our understanding of Müller's texts and to propel Müller scholarship into new directions. The articles in this issue engage, in similar and different ways, with a broad array of theoretical reflections on memory: Jan and Aleida Assmann's notions of cultural memory, Alexander Etkind's soft and hard memory, Rothberg's multidirectional memory, Levy and Snaider's cosmopolitan memory,

and Griselda Pollock and Max Silverman's concentratory memory are central to the conceptual affiliation of memory studies and Müller scholarship. These examinations of memory strive to take what Rothberg has described as a 'located approach' to transnational memory in Müller's work.⁶ That is, while highlighting the specificity of the spatial and temporal locatedness of events and experiences and their moment of recall, the authors simultaneously aim to reach beyond the confines of specific instantiations of memory to allow for mobility and interaction with other memories, other contexts, and other cultures. In this, they engage in the paradoxical labour of recuperating the particular within the universal, while striving to connect the local to the global. As Astrid Erll persuasively argues, memories are mobile, 'memory must travel',⁷ and, as the analyses in this volume make clear, Müller's memory travels in multidirectional ways within her texts, and via the medium of the book or through her public speeches, it travels on to readers, listeners, critics, and scholars who are challenged to engage with it multidirectionally. Privileging the fragment, the detail, and the collage, Müller's memories are counter-monumental, refusing to be subsumed by master narratives – be they master narratives of history, ideology, literature, or aesthetics.

The poetic, visual, cultural, and memory theories utilized here are not deployed in isolation, but are put, implicitly or explicitly, in conversation with each other. For instance, Mallet combines Foucault's panopticon and W.T.J. Mitchell's notion of the hypericon to illuminate the imagery of surveillance and oppression in Müller's texts; Bizuleanu and Conkan connect their idea of transfer images with theories of space; Vinter sheds light on the entanglement of Müller's and Pastior's poetics by bringing to bear Deleuze and Guattari's notion of assemblage and the rhizome on the multidirectionality of memory; Hoeeg utilizes Agamben's concept of zones of indistinction within the context of autofiction to argue that readers must reconcile themselves with aspects of undecidability in Müller's texts; linking Müller's narratives to witness literature and reflections on post-Holocaust writing, Watson engages the notion of concentratory memory to unpack the pervasive imagery of death and decay in Müller's texts; Haines connects the poetics of Arendt and Müller to Benjamin's appreciation of small things and surrealist montage; and Bauer argues, by drawing on recent theories of memory, that Müller's texts challenge and surpland the idea of a homogeneous cultural memory and open up new vistas for discourses of human rights.

At the time of writing, with democratic and human rights under renewed threat across the

globe, we are reminded of the importance Walter Benjamin accorded to seizing ‘hold of a memory as it flashes by in a moment of danger’ because ‘every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably’.⁸ Thus, precisely at this historical juncture, when nationalism, racism, and totalitarianism are on the rise, it is our aim to facilitate memory’s travels. Within the context of post-communist Europe and the precarious status of democracy across the globe, Müller’s work on the damaging effects of exploitative regimes and the dehumanisation of human beings by human beings remains as relevant as ever. Transcending national, linguistic, generic, and cultural boundaries, Müller’s work speaks to audiences across the globe.

¹ For ‘triangulation’ in the context of transnational memory see A. Huyssen, ‘Diaspora and Nation: Migration into Other Pasts’, *New German Critique*, 88 (2003), 147-164, (57, 160).

² Judith von Sternberg, ‘Wer im Exil ist, konnte immerhin fliehen’, *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 8 May 2018, Available here: <https://www.fr.de/kultur/literatur/exil-ist-konnte-immerhin-fliehen-11007926.html> (Last accessed 28 January 2019).

³ Bernard-Henri Lévy, ‘Fight for Europe – or the wreckers will destroy it’ (‘Il y a le feu à la Maison Europe», le manifeste des patriotes européens’), *Guardian*, 25 January 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jan/25/fight-europe-wreckers-patriots-nationalist> (Last accessed 28 January 2019).

⁴ Norbert Otto Eke (ed.), *Die erfundene Wahrnehmung. Annäherung an Herta Müller*, Hamburg 1991; Brigid Haines (ed.), *Herta Müller*, Cardiff 1998; Lyn Marven, *Body and Narrative in Contemporary Literatures in German: Herta Müller, Libuse Moníková and Kerstin Hensel*, Oxford 2005; Bettina Brandt and Valentina Glajar (ed.), *Herta Müller: Aesthetics and Politics*. Lincoln 2013; Brigid Haines and Lyn Marven (ed.), *Herta Müller*, Oxford 2013; Norbert Otto Eke (ed.), *Herta Müller-Handbuch*, Stuttgart, 2017.

⁵ Alex Drace-Francis, ‘Beyond the Land of Green Plums: Romanian Culture and Language in Herta Müller’s Work’, in *Herta Müller*, ed. Brigid Haines and Lyn Marven, Oxford 2013, pp. 32-48; Jenny Watson, ‘Reden ist Silber, Schweigen ist Gold: German as a site of National Socialist memory and Romanian as the language of dictatorship in Herta Müller’s writing’, in *Edinburgh German Studies Yearbook 8 (New Literary and Linguistic Perspectives on the German Language, National Socialism, and the Shoah)*, ed. Peter Davies and Andrea Hammel, Edinburgh 2014 pp. 143-58; P. Shopin, ‘Unpacking

the Suitcases: Autofiction and Metaphor in Herta Müller's *Atemschaukel*', *Seminar*, 50/2 (2014), 197-215; Bettina Bannasch, 'Zero – A Gaping Mouth: The Discourse of the Camps in Herta Müller's *Atemschaukel* between Literary Theory and Political Philosophy', in *Other People's Pain. Narrative trauma and the question of ethics*, ed. Martin Modlinger and Philipp Sonntag, New York 2011, pp. 115-44; Roxana Compagne, Roxane, *Fleischfressendes Leben: von Fremdheit und Aussichtslosigkeit in Herta Müller's 'Barfußiger Februar'*, Hamburg 2010; Julia. Müller, *Sprachtakt: Herta Müllers literarischer Darstellungsstil*, Cologne 2014; Olivia Spiridon, 'Herta Müllers frühe Erzählungen: Kontexte, literarisches Umfeld und formende Impulse', in *Kann Literatur Zeuge sein? Poetologische und politische Aspekte in Herta Müllers Werk* [Jahrbuch für Internationale Germanistik, Reihe A, Band 112], ed. Dorle Merchiers, Jacques Lajarrige and Steffen Höhne, Bern 2014, pp. 61-79.

⁶ Michael Rothberg, 'Locating Transnational Memory'. *European Review*, 22/4, 652–656 (652).

⁷ Astrid Erll, 'Travelling Memory', *Parallax*, 17/4 (2011), 4-18 (12).

⁸ Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, transl. Harry Zohn, New York 1985, p. 255.