

A Multidirectional Europe: Post-Socialist Memory in Contemporary German Literature

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# **Abstract**

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Focusing on novels by three contemporary German authors and one multi-author theater text, “A Multidirectional Europe” investigates how their writing responds to post-1989 memory paradigms in which post-socialist memory, in relation to the Holocaust and Second World War, has received asymmetrical attention. Conceived as an interdisciplinary and comparative study, this dissertation analyzes how narrative texts by Herta Müller (1953-), Nino Haratischwili (1983-), Saša Stanišić (1978-) and the play *Ein europäisches Abendmahl* [2017] frame the memory of socialism in relation to the Holocaust, considering the ways in which these authors challenge the larger post- or transnational discourse of a supposedly “unified Europe.” Having migrated from Romania, Georgia, and Bosnia respectively, these authors, I argue, integrate post-socialist memories into German, and European, memory discourses through their play with genre, narrative structure, figurative language, and intertextuality.

Although sociohistorical context is crucial in my readings for questions of memory, this dissertation seeks to transcend bounded definitions of memory, embracing a dynamic approach

that is more inclusive in terms of the (hi)stories that are told and that contribute to the imagination of a heterogeneous continent. Combining cultural studies, literary analysis, and memory theory, I move away from reading these works under the lens of autobiographical trauma, seeking instead to examine the negotiation of post-socialist memory through attending to generic and formal elements of the literary texts. My literary close readings methodologically draw on individual texts, while reflecting how literature is in exchange with other media and also present in the public sphere. Rather than a homogeneous entity, I show, the invoked Europe constitutes a multidirectional network.

Through my focus on contexts beyond East Germany and its experience of state socialism, I address the intersections of migration and memory and their relevance for contemporary and future Germany and Europe, while counteracting approaches that traditionally center West Central Europe in discussions of the continent. In dialogue with Michael Rothberg's conceptualization of multidirectional memory, I furthermore contribute to ongoing debates on different histories of violence, such as the current discussion about the relation or interaction between the memories of colonialism and the Holocaust.

# Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	iv
Introduction: Transcultural Memory and State Socialism in the German Context .....	1
<i>A Historikerstreit 2.0?</i> .....	1
A Multidirectional Europe .....	8
East vs West in Europe .....	10
1989: A Peaceful Continent? .....	14
Western Eurocentrism.....	17
Memory in Eastern Europe .....	19
An Eastern Literary Turn .....	25
Chapter 1: Collaged Memory: Herta Müller's Futural Europe.....	33
Migration, Memory, and State Socialism .....	33
Herta Müller.....	39
The strange gaze / <i>Der fremde Blick</i> .....	43
Estranged Realism .....	48
Object-laden Prose .....	51
Perspective .....	56
Non-Narrative .....	60
Montage/Collage.....	64
Eastern vs Western Europe .....	69
Against Totalitarianism.....	72

Chapter 2: Entangled Memory: Nino Haratischwili's Generational Expansion of the	
<i>Nationalgeschichte</i> .....	74
<i>Das achte Leben (für Brilka)</i> .....	74
Nino Haratischwili .....	75
Against "Westsplaining" .....	76
Familial & Socio-Political Memory.....	80
A Generational Narrative .....	83
Great Women of (Hi)Story .....	85
Holocaust Memory.....	91
An Expanded History.....	93
Chapter 3: Unlimited Memory: Saša Stanišić's Open-Ended Origins.....	96
Stanišić vs. Handke.....	96
Genre: An Autobiography?.....	102
Immigrant Literature .....	110
A Post-Socialist <i>Bildungsroman</i> ? .....	113
Familial Memory .....	120
<i>Ein Weltmeister des Erinnerns</i> .....	124
Intertextual Network .....	129
Open-ended Futures .....	133
Chapter 4: Connected Memory: Solidarity and Transcultural Reflections.....	138
<i>Ein europäisches Abendmahl</i> .....	138
Comparative Memory .....	140
European Foundations .....	144

Peripheries / Center.....	148
Post-Fascist Europe.....	154
Western Canon.....	159
Female Perspectives.....	162
Multidirectional Resonances.....	167
Conclusion .....	172
Bibliography .....	179



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*For Noah*

# Introduction: Transcultural Memory and State Socialism in the German Context

## *A Historikerstreit 2.0?*

Since its publication in 2009, Michael Rothberg's *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* has been a seminal text in the field of Memory Studies.<sup>1</sup> Proposing a comparative framework, Rothberg suggests that through reading different histories of violence dialogically one can escape a competitive hierarchical mode of reading. In his book, for example, Rothberg examines multidirectional resonances between the memories of the Holocaust, National Socialism, colonialism, slavery, and antisemitism. Rothberg's theory of multidirectionality became standard for the field and his work in comparative transcultural memory contributed to the beginning of what Astrid Erll declared a "third phase" of Memory Studies.<sup>2</sup> However, the 2021 publication of the German translation of the text was met with outrage and a debate in the feuilletons in Germany, where Rothberg was accused of relativizing the Holocaust.<sup>3</sup> The debate around comparative memory and how the

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Astrid Erll, "Travelling Memory," *Parallax* 17, no. 4 (November 1, 2011): 4–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2011.605570>.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Rothberg, *Multidirektionale Erinnerung: Holocaustgedenken im Zeitalter der Dekolonisierung*, trans. Max Henninger (Berlin: Metropol, 2021). Reviews in both the *Welt* and *taz* newspapers took umbrage to Rothberg's idea on its publication in Germany: Schmid, Thomas, "„Multidirektionale Erinnerung“: Die Holocaust-Frage," *DIE WELT*, February 28, 2021, <https://www.welt.de/kultur/literarischewelt/plus226821125/Multidirektionale->

Holocaust may or may not intersect in other discussions of memories of violence has since developed into what has been called a second *Historikerstreit* [historian's dispute].

It is in this context that my dissertation sets out to develop different perspectives on memory, specifically looking at the memory of state socialism experienced in several European countries. My dissertation "A Multidirectional Europe" explores the intersection of memories at stake by turning to literature, examining works by Herta Müller, Nino Haratischwili, Saša Stanišić, and a multi-author play on Europe commissioned by the Viennese Burgtheater. I argue for an expansion of the framework that allows migrant, post-socialist memories to interact with the dominant paradigm of Holocaust memory in a way that is not combative and reductive, but nuanced, productive, and future-oriented.

To fully outline my intervention, it is useful to attend to the current memory wars in some detail. Often returning to Rothberg as a touchstone, the debate on comparison between histories of violence, particularly between the Holocaust and the history of colonialism, was reignited in what has since been dubbed the "Historikerstreit 2.0" – although this label is in turn being questioned.<sup>4</sup> On 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2021, Dirk Moses published an indictment of German memory culture under the title "The New German Catechism" in English and German on the Swiss website *Geschichte der Gegenwart*. Moses admonishes Germany for its self-reflexive memory practice when it comes to Holocaust memory that he concludes results in a non-inclusive, hierarchical

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Erinnerung-Die-Holocaust-Frage.html. Tania Martini, "Debatte um die Gedenkkultur: Diffuse Erinnerung," *Die Tageszeitung: taz*, March 5, 2021, <https://taz.de/!5751296/>. Jürgen Zimmerer's review is a notable exception to the negative reception: "Michael Rothberg: „Multidirektionale Erinnerung“ - Die Sackgasse der Opferkonkurrenz," *Deutschlandfunk Kultur*, February 18, 2021, <https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/michael-rothberg-multidirektionale-erinnerung-die-sackgasse-100.html>.

<sup>4</sup> See the debate on the "Catechism Debate" on the blog New Fascism Syllabus written by scholars from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds.

memory culture.<sup>5</sup> Written as a polemic, and thus pointed and forceful in tone, Moses's piece catapulted the debate on German memory culture leading to a discussion on the US-based blog New Fascism Syllabus in response that was mainly held by international and German scholars who are not based in Germany.<sup>6</sup> According to Moses, a series of events led him to write the piece: what he perceived as growing identification with the state Israel, increased Islamophobia in the mainstream, and the public shaming and ousting of individuals in the media and academia that led to the exclusion of mostly minority voices in Germany.<sup>7</sup> In a seminar "The Future of Atrocity Memory" hosted by the Memory Studies Association and Aarhus University's research group "Uses of the Past" (Denmark), Charlotte Wiedemann in response to Moses provocatively suggested Moses was attempting to be the "covering fire" to break open this "catechistic" structure for new voices to enter the stage and enter German memory discussions allowing for comparison, ultimately concluding that this did not happen and that it has led to an even more toxic atmosphere in the memory debate.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Moses, A. Dirk, "The German Catechism," *Geschichte der Gegenwart* (blog), May 23, 2021, <https://geschichtedergegenwart.ch/the-german-catechism/>; A. Dirk Moses, "Der Katechismus der Deutschen," *Geschichte der Gegenwart* (blog), May 23, 2021, <https://geschichtedergegenwart.ch/der-katechismus-der-deutschen/>.

<sup>6</sup> Jennifer Evans and Brian J. Griffith (Eds), "The Catechism Debate," *The New Fascism Syllabus* (blog), August 20, 2021, <https://newfascismsyllabus.com/news-and-announcements/the-catechism-debate/>. Of note are the following posts: A. Dirk Moses post in reaction to the debate his original article caused. A. Dirk Moses, "Dialectic of Vergangenheitsbewältigung," *The New Fascism Syllabus* (blog), June 15, 2021, <https://newfascismsyllabus.com/opinions/the-catechism-debate/dialectic-of-vergangenheitsbewaltigung/>. As well as Johannes von Moltke's response from a German Studies perspective. Johannes von Moltke, "Polemics and Provocations," *The New Fascism Syllabus* (blog), June 3, 2021, <http://newfascismsyllabus.com/opinions/the-catechism-debate/polemics-and-provocations/>. Bill Niven provides a historian's response. Bill Niven, "A Plea for More Balance," *The New Fascism Syllabus* (blog), June 2, 2021, <http://newfascismsyllabus.com/opinions/the-catechism-debate/a-plea-for-more-balance/>.

<sup>7</sup> A. Dirk Moses, "Remembering Genocide between East and West, North and South" (The Future of Atrocity Memory Seminar, Aarhus University: Uses of the Past at Aarhus University and Digital Memory Studies Association, 24.08.2022).

<sup>8</sup> Charlotte Wiedemann, "Response to A. Dirk Moses" (The Future of Atrocity Memory Seminar, Aarhus University, 24.08.2022).

It is worth noting that the catalytic text of the *Historikerstreit 2.0* debate was initially published outside of Germany, something that the German *Feuilleton* frequently point out, i.e., that this is a matter that people from outside are writing about with the insinuation that those outside do not understand the specific case of German memory culture. Postcolonial studies are often disparagingly invoked as a sort of embodiment of the scholars abroad who advocate a transcultural approach to Holocaust memory.<sup>9</sup> An antagonistic atmosphere has emerged whereby the debate largely falls along the divide of Germany-based scholars and journalists versus those at Anglo-American institutions – with the notable exception of the historian Jürgen Zimmerer in Germany.<sup>10</sup>

Both sides of the current debate agree that the Holocaust does not stand beyond comparison – and indeed as many point out on the NFS blog and in the critiques of Moses, historical comparison has long been practiced. In the volume *Ein Verbrechen ohne Namen* published in response to Moses's article and the ensuing debate, many of the latter's critics affirm comparison.<sup>11</sup> Saul Friedländer, for example, states that “der Holocaust nicht isoliert betrachtet werden sollte [the Holocaust should not be examined in isolation].”<sup>12</sup> However, he

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<sup>9</sup> E.g., Saul Friedländer writes “Das postkoloniale Denken versucht zu beweisen, dass die Vernichtung des europäischen Judentums ein Genozid wie jeder andere war, nämlich ein Töten aus konkreten und praktischen Überlegungen” [Postcolonial thinking tries to prove that the annihilation of European Jewry was a genocide like any other, namely a killing on the grounds of concrete and practical considerations]. Later he accuses “In den USA hat das postkoloniale Denken längst die Universitäten erobert, und auch im Kongress ist es fest verankert” [In the USA, postcolonial thinking has long conquered the universities, and is ingrained in the US Congress too]. Saul Friedländer, “Ein Genozid Wie Jeder Andere?,” in *Ein Verbrechen ohne Namen: Anmerkungen zum neuen Streit über den Holocaust* (C.H. Beck, 2022), 23; 30. Translations my own.

<sup>10</sup> By this I am not referring to the nationalities but rather the institutional homes of the academic and journalists, as there are many German scholars working in the United States who participated in the NFS blog who defend Moses from some of his critics in Germany. E.g., von Moltke, “Polemics and Provocations.”

<sup>11</sup> Saul Friedländer, *Ein Verbrechen ohne Namen: Anmerkungen zum neuen Streit über den Holocaust* (München: C.H. Beck, 2022).

<sup>12</sup> Friedländer, “Ein Genozid Wie Jeder Andere?,” 24.

nevertheless disagrees with situating the Holocaust into a larger context of historical violence, namely the context of colonialism. Friedländer, among others, rejects attempts to read tendencies of the genocide as corresponding to patterns that can be seen in the history of colonial expansion, charging the field of Postcolonial Studies with the crime of relativizing the Holocaust.<sup>13</sup>

According to Moses, he has been compared with Ernst Nolte's position in the *Historikerstreit* of the 1980s, namely one that relativizes the Holocaust and seeks to assuage or exonerate German responsibility for the crimes during the Second World War.<sup>14</sup> It is important to note, however, that these two debates are taking place in vastly different contexts – the debate of the 1980s should be understood in the specific context of postwar West Germany in the 1980s. The country was starting to “deal with” or at least more explicitly become aware of the Holocaust and Germany's role in the annihilation of European Jewry as well as uncovering the brown-tinted structures of power that persisted post-1945, i.e., people who participated or benefited under the Third Reich were still influential. The debate today, on the other hand, takes German memory to task with consideration to the changing landscape of German society in light of migration. Thus, while both Moses and Nolte do employ a comparative framework and both critique German memory culture the intention behind the comparison could not be more different. Nolte and other conservative historians of the time sought to exculpate German guilt by way of a comparison with the crimes of Stalinism, and thus relativized and universalized the violence of the Holocaust. Moses and other proponents of a transcultural approach such as Rothberg and the Germany-based historian Jürgen Zimmermann employ a comparative approach to add and create a more inclusive discourse that allows room for other histories of violence such

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<sup>13</sup> Friedländer, 24; 30.

<sup>14</sup> Moses, “Dialectic of Vergangenheitsbewältigung.”

as colonialism within a German cultural memory. It is not subtracting by way of relativization à la Nolte but rather additive in its attempt to increase the memories that are able to become part of the discourse.

Regrettably, Moses's critics have been bolstered by the fact that commenters from the far-right have picked up on and supported aspects of his article.<sup>15</sup> However, it is crucial to note that a critique of German memory culture is where the similarity ends. Both Moses and far-right actors, such as Martin Sellner, criticize the way that the Holocaust is remembered in an institutionalized way in today's Germany, but the intention behind the criticism and their conclusions are vastly different – like the divergence between Moses's and Nolte's positions. For example, Sellner seeks absolution from the responsibility of remembering altogether, and rejects Moses's conclusions which aim for a more diverse, open memory culture that is inclusive of migrant and racialized European voices; something that Sellner and the alt-right explicitly do not seek as it does not align with their white supremacist nativist views. What is at stake is, therefore, the intention and positionality when making a comparison; comparison between histories of violence and their memory in good faith are, of course, crucial to the important work of Memory Studies.

Thus, the comparison between Nolte, or Sellner, and Moses appears to be one that is made to delegitimize the latter's critique of German memory culture and avoid engagement with it. What Moses and other proponents of a transcultural approach such as Rothberg aim for is not what was at stake in the 1980s. However, as Moses reminds in "Dialectic of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*" – his response post to the debate on the New Fascism Syllabus blog – we are indebted to the work done by the participants of the *Historikerstreit* since it was an

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. von Moltke, "Polemics and Provocations."



important discussion of the time and necessary to counter the attempts to absolve responsibility for National Socialist crimes.<sup>16</sup>

Moses and Rothberg compare and engage with memories of violence in relation to one another, not to relativize or equate (*gleichsetzen*) but to explore patterns and potential resonances, since looking at the way we remember one history can aid in remembering another, serving a futural purpose. It is an expansion of the framework that does not seek to do away with the specificities of different histories of violence, but one that seeks to attend more attention to more histories, while looking at ways they potentially interact or are even implicated in one another.

There is a crucial distinction to be made between history and memory, although, of course, they cannot always be held apart so neatly and there is always overlap. History as a field seeks to answer the question of “what happened?” whereas the study of memory answers “how is what happened remembered and transmitted?” Indeed, there was some confusion in the 2021 debate seen in the misunderstanding of some German critics describing Rothberg as a historian: Rather, he works in comparative literature and cultural memory studies. Likewise, this dissertation is one that is informed by cultural memory and literary studies and its institutional home is within a Germanic Languages Department. While historical contextual information is incredibly important, I am interested in the workings of memory and how events are translated and transmitted, how they are remembered and remediated in literature.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

## A Multidirectional Europe

This dissertation intervenes in the current debate by examining the role of post-socialist memory in contemporary German literature, showing how post-socialist memory interacts with Holocaust memory through my close textual analysis.<sup>17</sup> I am not arguing for or against the uniqueness of the Holocaust in relation to Stalinist or other state socialist crimes, but rather seek to show how a network of comparative memory already exists and functions in literature. I show how memories interact while examining what post-socialist memory brings to the discussion of the contemporary German memory landscape that has until more recently been dominated by the Holocaust and Second World War. To undertake this reading of post-socialist memory in contemporary German-language literature, I develop an intellectual framework that is informed by multiple scholarly traditions, primarily literary studies, feminist scholarship, and cultural memory studies.

The *Historikerstreit 2.0* was largely debated in the *Feuilleton* or academic blogs, a scholarly debate between academics, journalists, and political figures that took current German memory culture to task, asking whether it allows room for migrant and racialized European memories. Dirk Moses criticizes an institutionalized memory culture that fails to adequately recognize other collective memories (e.g., the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, colonial memory) as constitutive to a contemporary inclusive and diverse Germany.

The arts, as well as academia and the media, are not divorced from politics, since funding, prizes, and academic positions are financed through public funds, yet I claim that

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<sup>17</sup> I use “text” in its broadest sense as I consider novels, poems, theatre texts, where I analyze the performance and visual elements of the piece.

literature is nevertheless asking these questions and introducing constellations of memory into a network long before these debates (Mbembe, Rothberg, Moses) have started taking place – and literature continues to do so.<sup>18</sup> Literature, I argue, establishes this network in a way that does not undermine or relativize the Holocaust, but rather aims at precisely what Moses calls for: an inclusive, diverse, and tolerant network of memory that holds space for multiple histories of violence. My dissertation argues that this multidirectional network established in literature serves as a basis for finding the connective potential between various histories of violence as a foundation for solidarity and the future. I maintain that the Holocaust does remain a dominant paradigm, since it is integral to an understanding of German cultural memory, but this networking of memory works to open up, not to overshadow or relativize. As I show in the case of post-socialist memory in the German context, the texts often connect or reference the Second World War and the Holocaust, utilizing it as a mnemonic resource that aids in the integration of new memories into the multidirectional network.

Different cultural memories present different foundations for imagining the future, as well as for imagining what constitutes a German and European identity. I choose to say “different” and not “competing” since while some memories may stand in tension with one another based on how various groups remember a certain past (e.g., how 1945 is perceived in West Germany in comparison to East Bloc countries), holding space for multiple memories to exist and dialogue in good faith with one another is key to a non-competitive, inclusive memory practice. Of course, herein exists the danger of denial, as in the very real case of Holocaust

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<sup>18</sup> Achille Mbembe, professor at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa, had been scheduled to deliver the keynote address at the 2020 Ruhrtriennale but was later disinvited amid accusations of the relativization of the Holocaust and anti-Semitism in his work. On the general Mbembe affair see Astrid Erll and Jeffrey K. Olick’s helpful summary. “Memory Studies and the Future of Memory: A Conversation between Astrid Erll and Jeffrey K. Olick,” in *Die Zukunft der Erinnerung: Perspektiven des Gedenkens an die Verbrechen des Nationalsozialismus und die Shoah*, ed. Christian Wiese et al. (Boston: De Gruyter, 2021), 259–62.

denial. I argue, nevertheless, that analyzing how different events are remembered or mediated can lead to a solid foundation for thinking about the future.

Many of these issues, particularly in relation to the relation between an Eastern European memory, have been thrown up considering the Russian invasion of its neighbor Ukraine: What do we mean when we talk of Europe? Or can we even extrapolate such questions so easily? Is it possible to talk of a political Europe that is separate from a cultural one? Indeed, what would a cultural Europe be? While a geographical delimitation of the continent may seem the most straightforward since the continent is largely surrounded by water, its Eastern extremity varies when the continent is geographically, politically, or intellectually defined. And so, what constitutes Eastern Europe and Western Europe? Where does the divide or split begin or begin to emerge?

### **East vs West in Europe**

The matter of what is East and what is West is tied to cultural memory and the imagination of what constitutes European identity, and of a hierarchical indexing of the West as superior to East emerges along the Cold War divide. This duality is certainly a simplified one, yet a divide exists because of the legacy of state socialism and the different systems that dominated on the continent after the Second World War – although the legacy of empires, (e.g., the Prussian, the Habsburg, the Russian, the Ottoman) on the continent also inflects European memory and consequently its identity. Multiple historical layers ensue due to the various configurations by which one can define a cultural memory, be it by political system (East/West), legacy of an empire (e.g., Habsburg/Prussian), political views (right/left), nation state (e.g., Germany/Poland),

or post-national entity (e.g., European/European Union). Often, the nation state is invoked as a container for a uniform cultural memory, as theorized by Pierre Nora in *Les Lieux de Mémoire*.<sup>19</sup> Citizens' shared experiences are the basis for the formation of social group that is nationally coded, resulting in a national collective cultural memory. However, this understanding of a nation does not account for the "fuzzy edges" of collective memory that overlap, since, for example, it does not necessarily account for memory inflected by migration. Collective memory is constantly in (re)negotiation and constitutes an exchange of knowledge between individuals as first outlined by Maurice Halbwachs, the so-called "founding father" of Memory Studies, in *Les Cadres Sociaux de la Mémoire* [1925; *Social Frameworks of Memory*].<sup>20</sup> Halbwachs's approach of "social frameworks" belies a similar "contained-ness" as Nora's national model since it suggests closed groups. In current research and my own understanding, however, memory is a fluid exchange between individuals and groups that does not heed boundaries. It circulates across them. I do not assert that there is one globalized memory or collective, but there are groups who draw on mutual frames of references and mnemonic resources in the continuous construction of memory. I maintain, however, that these groups are dynamic themselves and similarly in constant (re)negotiation which in turn inflects the production of memory.

In terms of collective memory, calls for a "European" memory reveal different imaginations about what it is to be European, what contributes to a "European" identity, what the foundations of Europe are, and what is even imagined when we talk of "Europe." In the wake of

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<sup>19</sup> Pierre Nora elaborated on sites of memory and their relation to the formation of a cultural memory in a given community in *Les Lieux de Mémoire* – specifically Nora examines sites of memory in France. His work led to the establishment of the nation as a framework for memory. Pierre Nora, ed., *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, Bibliothèque Illustrée Des Histoires (Paris: Gallimard, 1984).

<sup>20</sup> Maurice Halbwachs. *La mémoire collective*, edited by Gérard Namer (Paris: A. Michel, 1997). Maurice Halbwachs. *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. by Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

the fall of the Berlin Wall, a narrative of a now “unified” European continent emerged that sought to teleologically explain the events of the “dark” twentieth century. And in a sense the continent was unified, or rather “desperately uniform” due to the establishment of neoliberalism and US hegemony on the world stage as Enzo Traverso has described.<sup>21</sup> Prior to 1989, the global order was largely cut along two antagonistic sides – a US superpower versus the Soviet Union. According to Matthew Specter, the USSR provided a “symbolic anchor” for both the communist and non-communist Left and its collapse “disoriented or demoralized many leftists.”<sup>22</sup> The Marxist Left floundered since the idea of an international socialism was “thrown out with the Stalinist bathwater”, as Specter describes it, with the result that the left/right distinction became increasingly obsolete.<sup>23</sup> According to political scientists, the traditional right/wing cleavage has collapsed and has been replaced with a model that sees populist parties versus centrist ones, whereby the former reject globalization and immigration in terms of both their cultural and economic aspects and evince a strong Euroscepticism.<sup>24</sup> The divide falls between those who favor a globalist multicultural world and those driven by a nativist one. In these distinctions, memory plays an important role as it is frequently enacted or invoked as justification for a particular worldview. For example, in the 2010s claims of a shared monolithic cultural

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<sup>21</sup> Enzo Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 2.

<sup>22</sup> Matthew G. Specter, “What’s ‘Left’ in Schmitt? From Aversion to Appropriation in Contemporary Political Theory,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Carl Schmitt*, ed. Jens Meierhenrich and Oliver Simons (Oxford University Press, 2017), 449.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Abdul Noury and Gerard Roland, “Identity Politics and Populism in Europe,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 23, no. 1 (May 11, 2020): 422.

background bolstered nationalist movements and populist parties (e.g., AfD, UKIP, Partij voor de Vrijheid, Le Front National).

Different memory discourses operate against this backdrop, approaching it from different angles. In this way, they also disrupt the uniformity identified by Traverso on the continent as they show that different foundations for thinking about the future still exist – even in the unfortunate problematic cases mentioned above. Post-1989 discussions of European memory are, however, typically dominated by Western European memory;<sup>25</sup> a dominance that exists even after, according to Blacker and Etkind, a similar Eastern European “memory boom” took place after the collapse of state socialism.<sup>26</sup> While the Cold War divide and Stalinist crimes are recognized and form what Aleida Assmann names as one of the key events of European memory, the other key event, World War Two and the Holocaust, has received significantly more attention in scholarship and (Western) European memory culture until more recently.<sup>27</sup> As discussed above, the Stalinist crimes did form a significant part of the discussions during the original *Historikerstreit* in the 1980s. However, the debate was approached in a competitive manner that aimed at diminishing German responsibility for the Holocaust, viewing the Stalinist crimes from a Western perspective that was distinctly separate from hegemonic Western cultural memory. This Western European dominance in matters of memory resulted in a narrative of a now peaceful continent that had “overcome” its so-called “troubled” past and that could work towards

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<sup>25</sup> Ann Rigney, “Ongoing: Changing Memory and the European Project,” in *Transnational Memory: Circulation, Articulation, Scales*, ed. Ann Rigney and Chiara De Cesari (De Gruyter, 2014), 339–60.

<sup>26</sup> Uilleam Blacker, Alexander Etkind, and Julie Fedor, eds., *Memory and Theory in Eastern Europe*, Palgrave Studies in Cultural and Intellectual History (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 4.

<sup>27</sup> Aleida Assmann, *Das Neue Unbehagen an der Erinnerungskultur: Eine Intervention* (München: C.H. Beck, 2020), 155.

trans- or postnational discussions of memory. A memory of state socialism does exist in the European framework, yet it has entered the discourse primarily through a Western European perspective: the memory of Stalinism as a justification for why socialism needed to be overcome. The memories of people who come from the former Eastern Bloc and the unaligned Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia are therefore not necessarily represented and it is necessary to diversify these perspectives regarding memories of state socialism.<sup>28</sup>

### **1989: A Peaceful Continent?**

From both Western and Eastern perspectives, the year 1989 undoubtedly serves as an important turning point and “figure of memory” in contemporary cultural and history studies as well as in the public imagination – and indeed it serves as a pivotal date for this dissertation.<sup>29</sup> Post-1989 and after German reunification, a resulting narrative of a peaceful unified continent was established. This can be seen, for example, in the celebrations for the twenty-year anniversary of reunification in 2009 in Germany, particularly in then Bundespräsident Horst Köhler’s address at the start of the festivities, where he described the fall of the Berlin Wall as “das Zeichen für eine Epochenwende. Eine Epochenwende zu Freiheit und Demokratie” [a sign for a change of an era.

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<sup>28</sup> I distinguish between the Eastern Bloc and Yugoslavia since Yugoslavia was a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement that sought to maintain relations with both Western and Eastern blocs during the Cold War.

<sup>29</sup> Jan Assmann defines “figures of memory” (*Erinnerungsfiguren*) in his theory on cultural memory as referring to “fixed points in the past” that have a concrete relationship to a specific group. Cf. Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*, 7. Ed (München: Beck, 2013), 37–42; 52. Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 23–28; 37.



A change of an era towards freedom and democracy].<sup>30</sup> Köhler emphasizes this supposed peace later in his speech:

Zwischen Ländern, die vor 20 Jahren noch auf verschiedenen Seiten des Eisernen Vorhangs lagen, gibt es heute praktisch keine Grenzkontrollen mehr. Im Euroraum benutzen wir eine gemeinsame Währung. [...] Ich glaube, das Glück der europäischen Vereinigung, der gewonnenen Sicherheit und des gemeinsam erreichten Wohlstands birgt auch eine Verpflichtung für uns Europäer zur Verantwortung in der Welt.

Between countries that 20 years ago still lay on different sides of the iron curtain, today there are practically no longer any border controls. In the Euro zone we use a common currency. [...] I believe, the fortune of European unification, the won security and the prosperity reached together also obliges us Europeans to show responsibility in the world.<sup>31</sup>

This story is however a rose-tinted one since it elides the difficulties of integrating the multitude of memories, legacies, and systems into a “unified” continent. Furthermore, the subsequent anniversary celebrations forgot, or overlooked that conflict and genocide did not come to an end with the fall of the Berlin Wall and that not everywhere was as prosperous as Germany. There was no ultimate peace in Europe after a century of war and division, seen, for example, in the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, the Troubles in Northern Ireland that continued into the 1990s, and the Russo-Georgian War in 2008 in the year preceding these 20-year anniversary celebrations. While Köhler predominantly appears to reference the European Union (“common currency”) in the above quote, he does refer to Europe at large in the beginning of his speech (“das Gesicht unseres Kontinents”). The much lauded “won security” reads as a Western European point of view that overlooks the threat that former Bloc countries perceived as still existing from Russia.

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<sup>30</sup> Köhler, Horst, “‘Eine Epochenwende zu Freiheit und Demokratie.’ Ansprache von Bundespräsident Horst Köhler beim Empfang zur Feier des 20. Jahrestags des Mauerfalls,” 09.11.2009, [http://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/DE/Horst-Koehler/Reden/2009/11/20091109\\_Rede.html](http://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/DE/Horst-Koehler/Reden/2009/11/20091109_Rede.html). [Accessed 29.04.2023].

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. Translation is my own.

A similar dynamic has arisen recently in light of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine whereby the narrative of “a peaceful continent until now” has been repeatedly emphasized. In the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, the beginning of an Op-Ed by Jürgen Habermas was initially published as “nach 77 Jahren ohne Krieg” [after 77 years without war] until it was later edited to “77 Jahre nach dem Ende des Zweiten Weltkriegs” [77 years after the end of the Second World War].<sup>32</sup> The editorial change shows how WWII memory has significant currency in the European imagination, since the updated version suggests that in public discourse World War Two is perceived as the last war on the continent. While perhaps this makes sense from a German perspective – the Op-Ed appeared in a German publication – as the Second World War was the last war the country was embroiled in, Habermas makes claims to a European sense and the elision of postwar European conflicts is telling.

The narrative of peace partly explains the ostensible shock felt on the continent – at least in its Western parts – as a reaction to the Russian attack on Ukraine. The perceived peace clouded the Western view into forgetting previous invasions of a sovereign state, namely the Russian Georgian twelve-day war (2008) or the Russian annexation of Crimea in Ukraine (2014). The lack of response to these incidents in comparison to the recent Ukrainian conflict – while admittedly the scale is larger in the latter case – has subsequently led to a re-evaluation of the Russo-Georgian war, which is critical of this lack of response, and to a general reconsideration of East-West European relations.

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<sup>32</sup> Translation my own. Habermas, Jürgen, “Krieg und Empörung. Jürgen Habermas zur Ukraine,” *Süddeutsche.de*, April 28, 2022, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/projekte/artikel/kultur/das-dilemma-des-westens-juergen-habermas-zum-krieg-in-der-ukraine-e068321/Bundeskanzler-Olaf-Scholz>, similarly, refers to this number in his address in May 2022: “Umso schmerzhafter ist es mitzuerleben, wie heute, 77 Jahre nach dem Ende des Zweiten Weltkriegs, erneut rohe Gewalt das Recht bricht, mitten in Europa” (my emphasis). Olaf Scholz, “Fernsehansprache von Bundeskanzler Olaf Scholz zum Gedenken des Endes des Zweiten Weltkrieges” (Berlin, 2022), <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/bulletin/fernsehansprache-von-bundeskanzler-olaf-scholz-2038050>.

## Western Eurocentrism

I argue that this lack of response to previous conflicts reveals the Western Eurocentrism underlying the German, and more broadly Western European, imagination of European identity. It leads to a homogenized perspective of the formerly socialist states that are commonly subsumed under Eastern Europe. The teleological narrative of overcoming state socialism and becoming democratic states furthermore disregards the various specific situations of formerly communist nations as well as the subsequent democratization processes: the Soviet Union itself, non-aligned former Yugoslavia, Eastern Bloc e.g., Poland, Czech Republic etc. The experience of those living in the Soviet Union differed from those under Josip Broz Tito in Yugoslavia. The cultural blind spot of perceiving the memory and events in the Eastern Bloc and non-aligned Yugoslavia as undifferentiated in the collective imagination leaves Eastern European concerns “peripheral” to those of the West.

The insight that Eastern European concerns are often part of a periphery is one much affirmed by those from Eastern Europe and by scholars researching European dynamics. For example, in a discussion of a divide along Europe’s North/South axis, Jobst Welge argues that the “idea of Europe is based on the existence of its *internal* peripheries” and that the “production and representation” of these peripheries “are part of the ‘European identity formation.’”<sup>33</sup> The referential system of peripheries and center begs the questions: whose periphery? Which center?

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<sup>33</sup> Jobst Welge, *Genealogical Fictions: Cultural Periphery and Historical Change in the Modern Novel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 7. Emphasis in original.

Whose agency? From whose perspective? These questions guide my analysis of the texts at the center of this dissertation, as I look at how each author provides or seeks an answer to them.

The question of the map of Europe has a long tradition with various centers being claimed throughout history, all varying due to what is being counted as Europe or sometimes if defined within the parameters of the European Union: e.g., claims to the geographic center include Ukraine, Lithuania, or Germany in the post-Brexit landscape of the European Union. Serhii Plokhy notes the political motivations of claiming centrality as he recounts how in 1887 Austrian geographers placed a landmark near the town of Rakhiv (today's Ukraine), purporting its location as Europe's center and thus within the Austro-Hungarian Empire.<sup>34</sup> Various intellectuals and politicians from former Eastern Bloc countries have similarly claimed centrality to “put themselves on the map” of Europe in the Western European imagination, according to Plokhy, as they sought to distance themselves from the communist East.<sup>35</sup> Emphasizing the cultural legacy of Hungary, Poland, and the former Czechoslovakia, Milan Kundera defines Central Europe as politically in the East since 1945 in an essay titled “Un Occident kidnappé ou la tragédie de l'Europe Centrale” [The Stolen West or the Tragedy of Central Europe]. However, Kundera argues that historically Central Europe is rather aligned with the West as the cultural center of Europe.<sup>36</sup>

In the German context, the idea of *Mitteleuropa* – not synonymous with Kundera's understanding of Central Europe – has similarly been variously defined and it historically has been

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<sup>34</sup> Plokhy, Serhii, “Epilogue. The EuroRevolution: Ukraine and the New Map of Europe,” in *Ukraine and Europe: Cultural Encounters and Negotiations*, ed. Brogi Bercoff, Giovanna, Plokhy, Serhii, and Pavlyshyn, Marko (Toronto ; Buffalo ; London: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 437.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 436.

<sup>36</sup> Kundera writes: “Par son système politique, l'Europe centrale est l'Est; par son histoire culturelle, elle est Occident.” Kundera, Milan, *Un Occident kidnappé. La tragédie de l'Europe centrale* (Paris: Gallimard, 2021), 76.

tioned to a cultural space rather than a geopolitical one, such as in the 1980s debates about *Mittleuropa*.<sup>37</sup> Yvonne Zivkovic explains how from the 1980s “a group of Eastern European dissidents [...] referred to the same literary idea [of *Mittleuropa*] to reclaim their belonging to a Central European space whose cultural heritage had been obscured by the consequences of the Cold War.”<sup>38</sup> Citing Kundera, Zivkovic argues that Central Europe, “broadly conceived along the territorial lines of the former Habsburg Empire, was now ‘geographically at the center, culturally in the West and politically in the East’ and had thus been transformed from Europe’s ‘cultural home’ into uncharted territory, forgotten by the West.”<sup>39</sup> The debates and discussions about *Mittleuropa* are heavily tied to matters of memory and identity, as they show how the production and representation of various centers and peripheries, be they geographically, politically, or culturally constructed, are key to the construction of European identity and that they are constantly in (re)negotiation.

## Memory in Eastern Europe

While my naming of the formerly socialist states as belonging to “Eastern Europe” is not nuanced, I contend it is nevertheless productive to heuristically refer to the part of the continent that was “on the other side of the wall” as Eastern Europe. The different foundations for thinking

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. Yvonne Zivkovic, *The Literary Politics of Mittleuropa: Reconfiguring Spatial Memory in Austrian and Yugoslav Literature after 1945* (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2021), chap. Introduction.

<sup>38</sup> Zivkovic, 10. The dissidents Zivkovic highlights are György Konrád, Milan Kundera, Czesław Miłosz, and Danilo Kiš.

<sup>39</sup> Zivkovic, 10. Zivkovic cites Kundera who writes “L’Europe [est] située géographiquement au Centre, culturellement à l’Ouest et politiquement à l’Est.” Kundera, Milan, *Un Occident kidnappé. La tragédie de l’Europe centrale*, 41.

and the different political systems that existed for a significant part of the twentieth century have led to a certain binary that is particularly pertinent when considering the differing memory discourses. Indeed, talking of the center implies certain notions of power and a hegemonic relationship to the periphery that is often perceived as behind which appears to play out in matters of memory – the concerns and experiences of Georgia or Romania have long played a subdued role in European memory discourse. However, in analyzing works by authors who hail from different parts of “Eastern Europe” (i.e., East Central Europe, or South Eastern Europe, or Eastern Europe) I seek at the same time to brush against the grain of the at times unreflective moniker Eastern Europe to counter the cultural blind spot and decenter Western Europe dominance.

Traverso writes in his introduction to *Left-Wing Melancholia* that “communism was reduced to its totalitarian dimension, which appeared as a collective, transmissible memory.”<sup>40</sup> This dominant representation of state socialism does not, however, leave room for an engagement with neither everyday experiences nor the legacy of solidarity inherent in the post-socialist past since it merely consigns this legacy to obscurity. Furthermore, this simplified depiction of state socialism in European collective memory conceals the complex structure and network of memory at play.

Firstly, it elides the lacking *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in the former socialist states, where there existed a culture of suppression (as well as voluntary amnesia) in favor of official state memory until 1989 according to Blacker and Etkind.<sup>41</sup> In the political East, official narratives were explicitly anti-fascist ones, often justified or reinforced by stories of communist resistance movements during the Second World War (e.g., the Yugoslav Partisans led by Josip Broz Tito).

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<sup>40</sup> Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia*, 2.

<sup>41</sup> See Uilleam Blacker and Alexander Etkind, “Introduction,” in *Memory and Theory in Eastern Europe*, Palgrave Studies in Cultural and Intellectual History (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 8–9.

The former German Democratic Republic, for example, saw itself as the embodiment of the anti-fascist resistance movement during the Second World War and thus as a “better Germany” with former Nazi criminals to be found in its Western neighbor. While the denazification process was more consistent in the GDR, some former Nazis were, however, similarly able to integrate themselves into East German society.<sup>42</sup>

While this official stance made the process of “working through” seem unnecessary, it did not, however, go unchallenged. Despite the official stances on fascism and a culture of censorship, there were some who voiced criticism, most prominently Christa Wolf who became disenchanted with the East German regime. As Stuart Parkes words, Wolf’s novel *Kindheitsmuster* mounts a challenge to “crude GDR historiography,” in which she confronts people’s enthusiasm for National Socialism in her childhood town during the Second World War.<sup>43</sup> Parkes continues to state that Wolf was “(in)famously [...] dubbed as the ‘state poet’ of the GDR by conservative West German critics” at the time of unification, despite her critical stance towards the GDR regime. The example of Wolf and her nuanced relationship to GDR official memory shows that it is crucial to remember a more differentiated past.

Secondly, the negotiation of Holocaust and Second World War memory that did take place in respective Eastern European countries in its institutionalized form has been critiqued for its

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<sup>42</sup> E.g., The case of Horst Fischer. During World War Two, Fischer worked as a camp doctor at the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. He was able to integrate himself into East German society after the war working as a doctor in Brandenburg for approximately 20 years until his crimes came to light. After a trial in the GDR, he was sentenced to death in 1965 for his involvement at Auschwitz.

<sup>43</sup> Stuart Parkes, “Günter Grass and His Contemporaries in East and West,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Günter Grass*, ed. Stuart Taberner (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 211, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521876704.016>.

(ab)use in the legitimization of further repressive regimes.<sup>44</sup> The contested memory work can be seen most clearly in the history of memory of the Katyn massacre in Poland: Almost 22,000 Polish prisoners of war were executed by the Soviet secret police in April-May 1940. After the discovery of the mass graves, the USSR claimed the executions were carried about by Nazi Germany. However, in 1990 the USSR and Russian Federation acknowledged it was the NKVD. And indeed, the memory of the Holocaust is being invoked again today by the Russian government in its justification for the invasion of Ukraine seen in Russian President Vladimir Putin's claim that the aim is to achieve the "denazification" of Ukraine.<sup>45</sup> The question of memory in the East, therefore, is different due to the distrust in official memory and how things "should" be remembered, because of how official memory was at work under communist and Soviet rule.

Thirdly, thinking through this nexus of memory in terms of transcultural memory poses an interesting case. As Justyna Tabaszewska helpfully highlighted, transcultural memory is a memory of the past for the East and nations are in a process of building their national memories outside of the multinational states (e.g., SFR Yugoslavia, USSR) or the Eastern Bloc at large.<sup>46</sup> So how does this play out in the EU which lays similar post-national claims for a general European identity? And what is post-socialist memory if we engage with it and look beyond its totalitarian dimension while also acknowledging the latter? That is, not to ignore its totalitarian dimension but instead to

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<sup>44</sup> See, for example, Tony Judt, "The Past Is Another Country: Myth and Memory in Postwar Europe," in *The Politics of Retribution in Europe: World War II and Its Aftermath*, ed. István Deák, Jan T. Gross, and Tony Judt (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), 298.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Anton Troianovski, "Putin Announces a 'Military Operation' in Ukraine as the U.N. Security Council Pleads with Him to Pull Back.," *The New York Times*, February 24, 2022, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/23/world/europe/putin-announces-a-military-operation-in-ukraine-as-the-un-security-council-pleads-with-him-to-pull-back.html>.

<sup>46</sup> I am thankful to Justyna Tabaszewska for this feedback on my paper "Multidirectionality as Textual Practice" which I presented at the Frankfurt Memory Studies Platform on April 12<sup>th</sup>, 2022.



widen the lens to not exclusively focus on it. How does post-socialist memory interact with already existing memory frames and discourses – such as the Holocaust? Do the authors envision the same type of post-socialist memory and history in a European discourse? Can one talk in the singular, of post-socialist memory or should it be pluralized? And what does the “post” of post-socialist memory signify?

It is important to acknowledge that memory does not simply exist in neatly transmissible entities but that it is in constant (re)negotiation, adding or expanding to an ever-growing network or archive. While on the one hand, the term post-socialist may be understood temporally as what comes immediately after state socialism ended, this forecloses contemporaneous engagements that took place while authoritarian state socialism still existed on the continent. Indeed, I begin with a reading of Herta Müller’s *Reisende auf einem Bein* [1989; *Traveling on One Leg*, 1998] a novel that takes place in West Berlin in the late 1980s and was published prior to unification. A temporal sequential understanding of the “post” of “post-socialist” further limits a thorough exploration of the complex workings of memory and ignores the network of memory that the post-socialist builds upon. In her elaboration of postmemory, Marianne Hirsch cites Rosalind Morris’s suggestion of the prefix “post” that “function[s] like a Post-it that adheres to the surfaces of texts and concepts, adding to them and thereby also transforming them in the form of a Derridean supplement.”<sup>47</sup> This understanding of an additive and transformative “post” is particularly productive for discussions of post-socialist memory, since it builds on foundational memory work that came from discussions of Holocaust memory, but it also seeks to transform and nuance discussions of memory on the continent to a network that is more reflective of the heterogenous, multidirectional continent.

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<sup>47</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 5.

Furthermore, the idea of a Post-it memory speaks to the element of the everyday that I address, since it does not solely focus on the memory of authoritarianism but allows the memory of the everyday to be more fully acknowledged in the palimpsestic collage of European memory.

Various theories of memory inform my analyses: Jan and Aleida Assmann's work on cultural memory, Pierre Nora's *lieux de mémoire*, Dan Levy and Natan Sznaider's cosmopolitan memory, and Michael Rothberg's paradigmatic multidirectionality. While the Assmanns' work on cultural memory conceives of memory as integral to group and national identity formation and Pierre Nora also theorizes the nation state as a key framework of memory, Sznaider and Levy, and Rothberg each seek to read transnational memory and its dynamic workings. Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider's article "Memory Unbound: The Holocaust and the Formation of Cosmopolitan Memory," examines collective memory in the age of globalization. They argue that alongside national collective memories there exists another form that they term "cosmopolitan memory."<sup>48</sup> Analyzing Holocaust memory as "a paradigmatic case for the relation of memory and modernity", the authors argue that its representations have become a shared past that transcends national and ethnic boundaries.<sup>49</sup> Levy and Sznaider identify a "future-oriented dimension" as a key feature of cosmopolitan memory since it does not look "toward the past to produce a new formative myth" but is rather focused on a "desire to prevent or limit future ecological disasters" according to a "[p]ost-national solidarity."<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, "Memory Unbound: The Holocaust and the Formation of Cosmopolitan Memory," *European Journal of Social Theory* 5, no. 1 (February 1, 2002): 87–106, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431002005001002>.

<sup>49</sup> Levy and Sznaider, 88.

<sup>50</sup> Levy and Sznaider, 101–2.

As indicated above, Rothberg's "multidirectional memory" understands memory to work within a network where the overlapping of different memories can be read in a non-competitive manner. This multidirectional understanding of memory forgoes a logic of competition (e.g., who suffered more) or, as Rothberg puts it, the "zero-sum struggle over scarce resources" which leads to one history of violence blocking another from view.<sup>51</sup> Multidirectional memory, on the other hand, looks at the negotiation and reception of different historical memories and ultimately works to create resonances between these different memories without creating a structure of hierarchy. Examining the way memory is negotiated under a *multidirectional* lens is thus inherently futural since it seeks to show the productivity of comparing memories for the contemporary moment and the future.<sup>52</sup>

The concept of *futurity* is key to my project as I argue for the potential of post-socialist memory for the present and future. Amir Eshel has described futurity as an "interplay of retrospection and prospection",<sup>53</sup> which aptly encapsulates the dynamic futural workings of memory that draw from the past and are enacted in the present. In thinking of memory in such a futural sense, I ascertain how the memory of the past is productive for today's and tomorrow's ethical and political troubles; it is what I call the *potential of the past*.

## **An Eastern Literary Turn**

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<sup>51</sup> Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, 3.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Ibid. Chapter 1; On futurity see Amir Eshel, *Futurity: Contemporary Literature and the Quest for the Past* (Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013).

<sup>53</sup> Eshel, *Futurity*, 254.

Literature and the arts pose and answer similar questions to those at stake in the so-called “Historikerstreit 2.0”, however in a different medium to the academic and journalistic discourse – which is why my arguments are driven by close readings of texts. Through close textual analysis, I read language, form, and content, examining how multidirectionality is working on a textual level as well as at the conceptual. At the same time, I consider contextual information, including biographic, socio-historical data, contemporaneous discourses, and the reception of the works. This methodological approach complements my theoretical understanding of memory as dynamic and as always engaged in dialogue.

I argue for the futural potential of memory in these texts, relating how they are crucial to thinking about contemporary issues such as questions of identity and belonging in Germany and Europe at large. Justyna Tabaszewska suggested that literature can be understood as a potentiality, which I find particularly productive in thinking through the nexus of memory, texts, and contemporary discourses.<sup>54</sup> Namely, it is useful in reconciling texts that were written twenty, ten or even a few years ago and my analysis connecting them to contemporary issues as the text is a potentiality that can be enacted at any time.

In a 2008 article, the scholar Brigid Haines suggested that German literature was experiencing an “Eastern Turn.”<sup>55</sup> Observing an increasing number of contemporary writings by authors from Eastern Europe, Haines dialogues with Leslie Adelson’s paradigmatic notion of the “Turkish Turn” to describe this phenomenon. In her analysis of the “Turkish Turn”, Adelson

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<sup>54</sup> Justyana Tabaszewska suggested this in a discussion of the Frankfurt Memory Studies Platform working group “Literature and Memory.”

<sup>55</sup> Brigid Haines, “The Eastern Turn in Contemporary German, Swiss and Austrian Literature,” *Debatte: Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* 16, no. 2 (August 2008): 135–49, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09651560802316899>.

challenges the concept of a Turkish migrant who is caught “between two worlds” according to the long-established trope. Rather, Adelson examines the effect of migration on the literary aesthetics and imagination of contemporary Germany.<sup>56</sup> Haines similarly traces the literature from a generation of migrant writers, focusing instead on those from the former socialist East and their work that has emerged since the fall of the Berlin wall and the disintegration of former Yugoslavia. Haines uses this term heuristically to develop an understanding of the contribution of these writers to contemporary German-language literature and the rediscovery of Eastern Europe as a literary topic and space.

An interest in the legacies of the Cold War and communist regimes, such as Nicolae Ceaușescu’s Socialist Republic of Romania, Tito’s SFR Yugoslavia or the former GDR, is apparent in contemporary German language literature especially in terms of how these memories are to be negotiated and how they fit into a larger post-socialist or “transnational” memory discourse of a “unified Europe.” The suggested “turn” is largely seen in the work of migrant authors such as those examined in this dissertation. However, the focus on writings that have emerged through the authors’ migrations from former Eastern bloc countries leads to these works of the so-called “Eastern turn” to be predominantly read under the lens of autobiographical memory and trauma. My dissertation integrates these questions but reads the respective authors’ texts beyond autobiographical considerations.

The selection of the authors at the focus of my dissertation is by no means exhaustive in relation to looking at post-socialist memory, but serves to demonstrate both the wide scope of memory work in contemporary German-language literature and also the heterogeneity of post-

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<sup>56</sup> Leslie A. Adelson, *The Turkish Turn in Contemporary German Literature: Toward a New Critical Grammar of Migration*, 1st ed, Studies in European Culture and History (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

socialist memories themselves, which is already evident when looking at the authors' biographies: Herta Müller lived in Nicolae Ceaușescu's Romania, was persecuted by the Securitate (Romanian secret police), and her mother was deported to a Soviet labor camp; Nino Haratischwili was born in 1983 in Tbilisi, the capital of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic which declared its independence from the USSR in 1991 and was followed by a civil war (until 1995); Saša Stanišić was born in 1978 in Višegrad and later fled with his family to Heidelberg because of the Bosnian war (1992-1995). The five authors of *Ein europäisches Abendmahl* have similarly diverse backgrounds although not all are from former socialist countries: Nino Haratischwili is Georgian as stated above; Terézia Mora grew up in the socialist Hungarian People's Republic (1949-1989) and later moved to Berlin after the political shift of 1990; Sofi Oksanen is a Finnish-Estonian novelist and playwright – she writes in Finnish and her contribution to the play was translated into German; Jenny Erpenbeck was born in East Berlin in the GDR; Nobel Laureate Elfriede Jelinek is an Austrian writer born in 1946.

While I acknowledge and contextualize relating to the authors' biographies, I do not undertake biographical readings that are dominated by the paradigm of trauma in relation to post-socialist memories of violence. Firstly, because much scholarship already exists on this, and secondly, because reading these authors' texts solely for the happenstance of their biographies reduces them and does not attend to their works in a non-essentializing way. While the texts themselves often deal with stories of migration (e.g., Herta Mueller's *Reisende auf einem Bein*, Saša Stanišić's *Wie der Soldat das Grammofon repariert*, or Haratischwili's *Das achte Leben (für Brilka)*) each author's story of migration is so different that a comparison of their work based on the fact of their migration alone is fragile. As Stanišić himself polemically claims: "I would argue that the colors of the novels' covers has [sic] a greater literary relevance than our biographical

backgrounds” [Ich würde behaupten, dass bei einem Roman die Farbe des Einbands literarisch stärker verbindet als der jeweilige biographische Hintergrund].<sup>57</sup> For while I deal with authors who come from “Eastern Europe”, as I have already elaborated the amalgamation of Eastern Europe is simply the same move as saying they are all immigrant authors.

Several authors examined in this dissertation call attention to the varied migration backgrounds of celebrated German authors who have long been accepted as part of the German-language literary canon. In discussing Lena Gorelik and Ilija Trojanow, two current authors with a story of migration, Stanišić reminds us that “one could, of course, go backward name-dropping endlessly: Heine, Nabokov, Mann, etc.”<sup>58</sup> Mora similarly asserts she is “genauso so Deutsch wie Kafka” [just as German as Kafka], highlighting that Kafka similarly comes from Bohemia and a German-speaking family living beyond Germany’s borders and yet his works belong indubitably to the German canon.<sup>59</sup>

The authors, whose texts I analyze in this dissertation, belong to a German canon because the notion of a German canon that is situated within specific geographical borders – which are not fixed and have changed multiple times over centuries – with no migration is a falsehood. And indeed, the designation of who writes “immigrant literature” appears arbitrary: Kafka, Mann, and Heine are perceived as German authors; Is Herta Müller perceived as an immigrant author? Are

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<sup>57</sup> Saša Stanišić, “Three Myths of Immigrant Writing: A View from Germany - Words Without Borders,” translated by Saša Stanišić, *Words Without Borders* (blog), 3.11.2008, accessed May 2, 2023, <https://wordswithoutborders.org/read/article/2008-11/three-myths-of-immigrant-writing-a-view-from-germany/>. Saša Stanišić, “Wie Ihr uns seht. Über drei Mythen vom Schreiben der Migranten,” in *Eingezogen in die Sprache, Angekommen in der Literatur: Positionen des Schreibens in unserem Einwanderungsland*, ed. Uwe Pörksen and Bernd Busch (Wallstein, 2008), 104f.

<sup>58</sup> Stanišić, Saša, “Wie Ihr uns seht: Über drei Mythen vom Schreiben der Migranten,” in *Eingezogen in die Sprache, Angekommen in der Literatur: Positionen des Schreibens in unserem Einwanderungsland* (Wallstein, 2008), 104f.

<sup>59</sup> Terézia Mora et al., “Ich bin ein Teil der deutschen Literatur, so deutsch wie Kafka. Interview, Berlin,” *Cicero*, 2005, 26–31.

Stanišić and Haratischwili, as they write in German and live in Germany? Does native language, nationality, or skin color influence who is considered to belong to “German literature”?

The geographic settings of the literary works analyzed in this dissertation include Romania, Germany, East-Central; West-Central; South-Eastern Europe. I contextualize the authors within the German literary tradition and as thoroughly belonging to a German canon, and thereby a Western or West Central one. In some instances, I attend to respective literary traditions from which the authors have migrated but within the parameters of this project I focus on the German tradition to examine the interactions and show how these authors from “Eastern Europe” integrate narratives and memories of state socialism to create a network of European identity that decenters the West and renegotiates the role of the East in contemporary German literature today.

My project seeks to counter a Western European dominance in matters of memory and to decenter it by attending to the geographic center of the continent: namely, the heterogeneity of Eastern Europe. I integrate these authors into a German canon while at the same time demonstrating they cannot merely be reduced to “East Bloc” experience. From Soviet memory to Yugoslav and Romanian memory, I examine several cases. My final chapter in turn analyzes a play that lays claim to a Europeanness or European identity and asks what it means to be European rarely mentioning specific geographical locations.

In Chapter One “Montaged Memory: Herta Müller’s Futural Europe,” I analyze the futural orientation of Herta Müller’s engagement with the past, taking the novels *Reisende auf einem Bein* [1989] and *Herztier* [1994] as case studies. Through her use of narrative montage, I show that she establishes a poetics of what she coined as a “strange gaze” [der fremde Blick], allowing her to negotiate a dynamic approach to memory that remains open to new access points. The memories of Ceaușescu’s Romania in her novels, I argue, work in a futural manner due to their inherent



ethical urgency to remember. Müller opens up space to examine questions regarding politics, ethics, and responsibility and, in particular, the role of *post-socialist memory* for contemporary Europe.

Reading post-socialist memory in relation to familial memory, my second chapter, titled “Entangled Memory: Nino Haratischwili’s Expansion of the *Nationalgeschichte*” looks at Nino Haratischwili’s 1279-page novel *Das achte Leben (für Brilka)* [2014, *The Eight Life (for Brilka)*]. By contrasting familial memory with references to wider historical and sociopolitical events, Haratischwili’s transgenerational text engages with the memory of the former Soviet Union. I explore how Haratischwili’s text through its focus on several generations allows for a longer timeframe. I claim Haratischwili works with and against the *Generationenroman* genre. Integrating her text, and the post-socialist memories within it, in a nonlinear fashion into a wider memory network, Haratischwili ultimately reveals how memories of later events can inflect earlier ones. This leads to the conclusion, I argue, that migrant authors – such as Stanišić and the authors in this dissertation – expand Germany’s national history, not only in terms of the new memories created through and by their migration, but also in relation to the events that happened in their homelands that later enter the German archive through the migrant.

In the following chapter, “Unlimited Memory: Saša Stanišić’s Open-Ended Origins,” I examine Saša Stanišić’s novel *Wie der Soldat das Grammophon repariert* [2006] and his essayistic text *Herkunft* [2019]. Making references to key works of the postwar period (e.g., Paul Celan’s “Todesfuge”), I show how Stanišić’s texts destabilize the “unified” narrative, highlighting that issues such as nationalism and ethnic cleansing still exist in post-1989 Europe and are even experiencing a forceful comeback in recent years. Stanišić’s texts, I argue, shatter the European Union’s “founding myth” of overcoming these problems, counteracting concrete teleological

narratives in favor of open-endedness. In particular, I analyze Stanišić's invitation to the reader in *Herkunft* to select between various endings. I argue that this future-oriented play with the text's conclusion transcends typical (auto)biographical recollections of origins by emphasizing the contemporaneous moment and encouraging explicit reader (inter)action in questions of memory.

In my final chapter "Connected Memory: Solidarity and Transcultural Reflections," I expand my previous analyses by examining post-socialist memory in a different medium. Looking at the 2017 theater text *Ein europäisches Abendmahl* [A European Supper] I analyze the implicit and explicit futural potential in the memories of totalitarian pasts. This chapter examines the ways in which the various memories of state socialism, colonialism, and the Holocaust interact in this play. The piece was written by five authors: Terézia Mora, Elfriede Jelinek, Nino Haratischwili, Sofi Oksanen, and Jenny Erpenbeck. The five contemporary female European authors were invited by the Wiener Akademietheater and director Barbara Frey to produce individual texts that reflect on the current state of Europe. Through relating these pasts to contemporary political challenges, all five authors address questions of European identity and unity, and the felt geographic imbalance between Eastern and Western European memory discourses, ultimately, I argue, developing potential connective moments of solidarity.

# Chapter 1: Collaged Memory: Herta Müller's Futural Europe

## Migration, Memory, and State Socialism

After the publication of Pierre Nora's *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, the study of memory became equated with national remembrance.<sup>60</sup> In this understanding, a collective cultural memory aids in the formation of social groups due to shared experiences which results in the formation of a national memory. There is little apparent room for dynamism in this model. Collective memory remains a key component in the establishment of identity, yet these static, nationally coded groups often lead to a rhetoric of exclusivity and exclusion regarding who belongs to said group – i.e., only those who share the same “memory background” can do so.

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of state socialism, and the expansion of the European Union, there has been a considerable increase in migration within Europe, with Thomas Nail naming the migrant as “the political figure of our time.”<sup>61</sup> In 2017, with regard to Germany, Cornelia Wilhelm writes that “since 2012, Germany has received the largest number of immigrants in the European Union and ranks second only to the United States as a “country of immigration”

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<sup>60</sup> A key text from the second wave of Memory Studies according to Astrid Erll, “Travelling Memory,” 6.

<sup>61</sup> Thomas Nail, *The Figure of the Migrant* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2015), 235.

worldwide.”<sup>62</sup> This trend continued with the UN report on 2020 migration statistics showing Germany as second in the list of destination countries for international migrants globally.<sup>63</sup>

In our increasingly globalized world, migration pulls at the fabric of the idea of a rigid collective memory. The third wave of Memory Studies scholarship has acknowledged this in its focus on transnational memory work, asking how migration affects memory production and how memory travels in our ever-connected world.<sup>64</sup> In the German context, the interaction between collective memory and migration is compounded by the fact that Germany did not see itself as a country of migration until towards the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, seen most evidently in the demarcation of economic immigrants as “*Gastarbeiter*” (*guest workers*) in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>65</sup> This perception of immigrants that consistently situates them as “guests” confers a status that is temporary, leading to an exclusionary practice that designates immigrants as “Other” and results in them not being able to participate in “German” society and by extension German memory work since they do not “belong.”<sup>66</sup> Cornelia Wilhelm writes “ever since the founding of the modern German nation state, labeling immigrants as “other” and “foreign” to Germany’s cultural – and at times, even racial – identity has been a central element of German identity building.”<sup>67</sup> Since

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<sup>62</sup> Cornelia Wilhelm, “Introduction,” in *Migration, Memory, and Diversity: Germany from 1945 to the Present*, ed. Cornelia Wilhelm (New York: Berghahn Books, 2016), 1.

<sup>63</sup> United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, “International Migration 2020 Highlights,” 2020.

<sup>64</sup> For example, Erll, “Travelling Memory”; Levy and Sznaider, “Memory Unbound”; Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*.

<sup>65</sup> There is a long tradition in Germany of understanding nationhood and ideas of belonging that have largely been defined in ethnocultural terms (*ius sanguinis*) — rather than political ones (*ius solis*). Germany also did not see itself as a country of immigration (*Einwanderungsland*) until the turn of the millennium.

<sup>66</sup> On the difficulties of what it means to “be German” see for example Zafer Şenocak, *Deutschsein: Eine Aufklärungsschrift* (Hamburg: Edition Körber-Stiftung, 2011).

<sup>67</sup> Wilhelm, “Introduction,” 1.

immigrants are forever labeled “other” and “foreign” are they ever able to participate in collective memory in Germany? How do their brought memories interact with the larger framework of memory in the destination country?

The Turkish-German writer Zafer Şenocak argues that “one can immigrate to a country, but not to its past” in an interview conducted by Karin Yeşilada for *Der Tagesspiegel* in 1995.<sup>68</sup> Şenocak’s reference to immigration and the past alludes to the question of what relationships or connections can be made between (personal) narratives of migration and wider historical context, such as the legacies of Second World War and the Holocaust and, as my dissertation investigates, state socialism across Eastern Europe. Since migration inherently produces transnational modes of being, migrants’ presence challenges the normative idea of a territorially bound nation-state – and a nationally understood definition of what can belong to a collective memory.

Şenocak specifically discusses the issue of the memory of the Holocaust, questioning how first and second-generation migrants engage and relate to this national memory of guilt when they migrated to the country after the events took place. He thematically and conceptually connects legacies of exile, forced migration and dislocation in the wake of the Nazi regime and the Holocaust with literatures of immigration into Germany by using intertextual practices. His narrative cites and alludes to multiple literary texts and histories of the twentieth century which results in a complex network of references and lends the narrative a montage-like structure. While Şenocak engages specifically with the case of Turkish immigrants and how they relate to the specifically German memory of the Holocaust, migrants from other backgrounds similarly engage

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<sup>68</sup> Zafer Şenocak, *Atlas of a Tropical Germany: Essays on Politics and Culture, 1990-1998*, ed. and trans. Leslie A. Adelson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 53.

with this defining collective memory and its artistic representations in navigating their own pasts, migration stories, and presents.<sup>69</sup>

With the fall of the Berlin Wall and collapse of the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe was opened to queries concerning memory. Similar questions arise in terms of how memories migrate and become part of the discourse in Germany in the case of Eastern European immigrants. Yet, the legacy of state socialism poses different questions since immigrants from Eastern Europe are “working through” or doing memory work in relation to a different totalitarian system and entering a German discourse largely dominated by the legacy of the National Socialist period.

The attitude displayed towards ethnic Germans who immigrated from Eastern Europe differs from the case of Turkish-German migrants, since the former are seen as German “resettlers” (i.e., not guests) and the latter perceived as “both non-European and Islamic [...] labeled as Muslims.”<sup>70</sup> Ethnic German immigrants are therefore more readily accepted into German society due to the perceived lack of difference – as well as the favorable migration support that the “resettlers” received and the *Gastarbeiter* did not. However, the perceived sameness of ethnic Germans to German society has not been without its own problems. The Romanian-German author Herta Müller writes in an essay titled “Herzwort und Kopfwort” for *Der Spiegel* about the difficulty she faced when applying to remain in Germany after fleeing from Romania where she was persecuted by the Securitate, the Romanian secret police. Having successfully passed a language test, she encountered confusion as to her immigrant status in Germany:

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<sup>69</sup> By describing the Holocaust a “German” memory here, I am specifically referring to a German collective memory of the Holocaust and not the global one.

<sup>70</sup> Most research focuses on Turkish-German immigration as the largest minority within Germany. On the differentiated inclusion and exclusion of Turkish-German migrants and ethnic German migrants see Asiye Kaya, “Inclusion and Exclusion of Immigrants and the Politics of Labeling,” in *Migration, Memory, and Diversity: Germany from 1945 to the Present*, ed. Cornelia Wilhelm (New York: Berghahn Books, 2016), 58.

Trotzdem fragte man im nächsten Büro, ob ich politisch verfolgt oder Deutsche sei. Ich sagte: beides. Der Beamte sagte: Beides geht nicht, dafür haben wir gar kein Formular. Sie müssen sich schon entscheiden. Der Beamte fragte, ob ich in Rumänien auch verfolgt worden wäre, wenn ich das, was ich getan hatte, als Rumänin getan hätte. Ich sagte: Ja, das wäre für einen Rumänen genauso riskant gewesen. Darauf sagte er: Da haben wir's doch, dass Sie also keine Deutsche sind.

Nevertheless, they asked in the next office whether I was politically persecuted or German. I said: both. The official said: Both won't work, we don't even have a form for that. You have to at least decide. The official asked whether I would have also been persecuted in Romania if I did what I had done as a Romanian. I said: yes, that would have been just as risky for a Romanian. To that he said: there we have it then, so you're not German.<sup>71</sup>

Müller shows the absurdity of the bureaucratic system through this anecdote – she contrasts her experience with her mother's own who simply stated she was German and received citizenship straightaway. It is also revealing of the underlying assumptions about identity and notions of Germanness at the time. While ethnic Germans were accepted as German, Herta Müller's insistence on the fact that she was in exile in Germany having been politically persecuted in Romania did not align: "Das Wort Exil ging mit Deutschsein hier in Nürnberg nicht zusammen" [The word exile does not fit with being German here in Nuremberg]. Writing autobiographically in this essay about exile, she claims that the authorities did not want to know anything about the dictatorship in Romania nor to perceive her as in exile. Reflecting on the location of the Admissions Facility, Müller writes "im Übergangsheim drinnen der Irrsinn, hier draußen das Epizentrum der Nazi-Verbrechen" [Inside the Admissions Facility was insanity, here outside the epicenter of Nazi crimes]. She brings together two histories of violence showing how her own story of immigration and exile from Nicolae Ceaușescu's Romania connects or rather touches the

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<sup>71</sup> Herta Müller, "Herzwort und Kopfwort," *Der Spiegel*, January 20, 2013, sec. Kultur, <https://www.spiegel.de/kultur/herzwort-und-kopfwort-a-28198d48-0002-0001-0000-000090638332>.

history of the Holocaust and those who fled National Socialism in the 1930s that is brought especially near as the location of the Admissions Facility was in Nuremberg.

Making this comparison, Müller clarifies that she is not equating her experience of trouble with the German officials in obtaining asylum: “dennoch wusste ich, dass diese Sackgasse, verglichen mit den ins Exil Gejagten der Nazi-Zeit, nur ein kleines Missgeschick war” [however I knew, that this impasse, compared with those who were forced into exile during the Nazi period, was only a small misfortune]. Instead, Müller points towards what she perceives as a blind spot in the German collective memory. She lists several prominent exiles (e.g., Carl Zuckmayer, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Toller, Else Lasker-Schüler, Stefan Zweig, Nelly Sachs) and how the experience of exile was defining for them, expressing confusion as to why exile is not spoken about as a state, ultimately making the case for a museum of exile.<sup>72</sup> In highlighting and relating her experience of exile to others, Müller draws out a resonance with their stories, suggesting that exile and fleeing the place of violence does not make the memory and problems relating to being persecuted disappear.

In this chapter, I analyze Müller’s coinage of a *fremden Blick* [strange gaze] that she describes as the altered alienated perspective that a person develops after persecution, emphasizing that it is not to be understood as the gaze of a foreigner. I argue that *der fremde Blick* permeates her texts and constitutes a poetics whereby her prose and verse function through examining the small details of narrative – never fully closing off or completing a narrative event, but always leaving and revealing open-access points. Linking this gaze to the political nature of Müller’s texts, I argue that her work negotiates the nexus of migration and memory through her narrative montage that mimics the structure of memory: It is dynamic, contingent, and not stable. Müller’s narrative

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<sup>72</sup> Along with Joachim Gauck, Herta Müller is now a patron of the Exilmuseum Berlin which is being constructed.



montage productively negotiates the memory of state socialism in Romania by opening the narrative and the bounds of memory to invite a forward-facing approach to dealing with memories of post-socialism that focuses on the interactions between the memory and its significance for the present, thus focusing on the contemporary.

I read Müller's particular engagement and negotiation of Romania's state socialist past as one that signals futurity, where futurity denotes gestures towards "new beginnings" through what Amir Eshel describes as an "interplay of retrospection and prospection" which takes present ethical and political concerns into consideration.<sup>73</sup> In her numerous talks, essays, and literary texts, Müller is highly concerned with such an ethical urgency to remember, since, as the editors of a recent special edition of *German Life and Letters* [Jan 2020] remark in their introduction to the issue, she "does not just bear witness, [but] she intervenes, warns, and mobilizes."<sup>74</sup> Through reading Müller's texts in terms of their futural orientation, I claim that Müller opens up space to question politics, ethics, and responsibility and, in particular, the role of *post-socialist memory* in contemporary Europe.

## **Herta Müller**

Born in 1953, Herta Müller grew up in a family that belonged to Romania's German-speaking minority, the Banat Swabians, in Nițchidorf – or Nitzkydorf as the Banat Swabians call the area. Her work thematically engages with and constantly reworks her experience of life under

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<sup>73</sup> Eshel, *Futurity*, 254.

<sup>74</sup> Karin Bauer et al., "Introduction: Herta Müller and the Currents of European History," *German Life and Letters* 73, no. 1 (2020): 2.

state socialism in Nicolae Ceaușescu's Romania, including her persecution by the Securitate (the secret police of the Socialist Republic of Romania). Müller began writing before her emigration and was close to the student literary group *Aktionsgruppe Banat* in Timișoara. This literary society consisted of a group of German-speaking Banat Swabians. According to Christine Vogel, the members of *Aktionsgruppe Banat* looked towards Western models, engaging with German cultural history and literature rather than their Romanian counterparts.<sup>75</sup> Müller's first work *Niederungen*, initially published in 1982, was a collection of short stories written from the perspective of a child growing up in Banat Swabia, however it was censored by the Romanian state. Müller's first publication after her migration was *Reisende auf einem Bein* [Traveling on One Leg], which was released in 1989 by the publisher Rotbuch Verlag. Her subsequent novels, such as *Herztier* [1994; The Land of Green Plums], *Heute wäre ich mir lieber nicht begegnet* [1997; The Appointment], and *Atemschaukel* [2009; The Hunger Angel], written after Müller's emigration, do not take place in Western Europe, but similarly explore themes of dictatorship, persecution, and memory.

Generally accepted as a German author and part of the canon today – the Nobel prize furthered her canonization – this privileged literary status was not always the case.<sup>76</sup> For a long time, Müller was read as Romanian German with an emphasis on her country of birth in the reception of her work. German literature published abroad was relatively unknown at the time despite prominent writers such as Paul Celan. On the publication of her first collection of short stories *Niederungen* – which received positive reviews in both Romania and Germany – she was

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<sup>75</sup> Vogel cites Richard Wagner, Müller's former husband and member of the same literary circle, who names "names 'Brecht, Bobrowski, Heißenbüttel, Volker Braun, die Wiener Gruppe'" as authors they read. Christine Vogel, "Rumanische Literatur," in *Herta Müller-Handbuch*, ed. Norbert Otto Eke (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler Verlag, 2017), 134–35.

<sup>76</sup> Cf. Sigrid Weigel, "Literatur der Fremde - Literatur in der Fremde," in *Gegenwartsliteratur seit 1968*, ed. Klaus Briegleb and Sigrid Weigel (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verl, 1992), 226–29.

perceived as a “Sensation” or “Exotin” in West Germany due to the fact that she was an author who wrote in German and did not live in a German-speaking country.<sup>77</sup> According to Wiebke Sievers, in the reception of *Niederungen*, Müller was praised for offering “den bundesdeutschen LeserInnen [...] einen Einblick in die ihnen fremde Welt der rumäniendeutschen Minderheiten” [West German readers an insight into the Romanian-German minorities’ world which was foreign to them].<sup>78</sup> Sievers explains the reviewers as interpreting Müller’s depiction of life in a Banat Swabian village as providing “ein[en] Blick in die eigene Vergangenheit” [view of their own past] and that this view was “stark geprägt von der Vorstellung, der kapitalistische Westen sei weiter entwickelt als der kommunistische Osten” [strongly informed by the idea that the capitalist West were further developed than the communist East] which disregarded the fact that *Niederungen* was set decades earlier in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>79</sup> In an essay “Wie Wahrnehmung sich erfindet” in *Der Teufel sitzt im Spiegel*, Müller writes of her frustration with this reception, describing how visitors were disappointed with the actual village compared to how she had perceived and depicted it in her texts, declaring “Ich halte nichts von der Magie der Landschaften, der Dörfer oder der unbewohnten Flächen” [I don’t think much of the magic of landscapes, of villages or uninhabited areas].<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Wiebke Sievers, “Deutschsprachige Rezeption in Rumänien und Mitteleuropa,” in *Herta Müller-Handbuch*, ed. Norbert Otto Eke (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler Verlag, 2017), 249.

<sup>78</sup> Sievers, 249. See also Norbert Otto Eke, “Herta Müllers Werke in Spiegel Der Kritik (1982-1990),” in *Die Erfundene Wahrnehmung: Annäherung an Herta Müller*, ed. Norbert Otto Eke (Paderborn: Igel, 1991), 117. Translation my own.

<sup>79</sup> Sievers, “Deutschsprachige Rezeption in Rumänien und Mitteleuropa,” 249. Translation my own. In Chapter Four of this dissertation, I explore the perception of the East as situated in the past in relation to the theater text *Ein europäisches Abendmahl*.

<sup>80</sup> Herta Müller, *Der Teufel sitzt im Spiegel: Wie Wahrnehmung sich erfindet* (Berlin: Rotbuch, 1991), 16–17. Translation my own.

Her status as an outsider to “German literature” initially remained the case even after her first publication in West Germany. Set in Germany, the novel *Reisende auf einem Bein* no longer deals with Banat Swabia. Instead, Müller explores the migration and arrival of a female protagonist to West Germany. Irene, the protagonist, was similarly read as a stranger and foreigner, with the novel’s early reception focusing on Irene as evidencing the “fremde[n] Blick der neu Angekommenen” [foreign gaze of a newly arrived person].<sup>81</sup>

Irene’s trajectory and migration mirror Herta Müller’s own biographical movement from Romania to West Germany in 1987 – although geographical references are never made explicit in the novel itself. Because of similarities between the empiric author’s life and her protagonists such as Irene, scholars have read Müller’s work autobiographically. Autobiographical readings of Müller’s texts are often directed through the lens of trauma due to Müller’s laconic style and the lack of narrative in her prose texts. Brigid Haines, for example, bases her analysis of trauma in *Reisende auf einem Bein* on Irene’s and Müller’s mutual experiences of persecution and experiences of migration.<sup>82</sup> I agree that a focus on migration and persecution are significant and key themes in the novel, since they frequently resurface in her work within an intratextual network, whereby Müller’s fictional texts (novels, short stories, and poems) and her non-fictional texts (such as speeches or essays) reciprocally cite one another.<sup>83</sup> However, I pay particular attention to the

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<sup>81</sup> Sievers, “Deutschsprachige Rezeption in Rumänien und Mitteleuropa,” 251. Translation my own.

<sup>82</sup> For readings on trauma in the novel, see: Brigid Haines, “‘The Unforgettable Forgotten’: The Traces of Trauma in Herta Müller’s *Reisende auf einem Bein*,” *German Life and Letters* 55, no. 3 (July 2002): 266–81.; Lyn Marven, *Body and Narrative in Contemporary Literatures in German: Herta Müller, Libuse Moníková, Kerstin Hensel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 53–114.

<sup>83</sup> For example, the identical first and last sentences of the novel *Herztier* provide the title for one of Müller’s speeches in her Tübinger Poetikdozentur lectures [2001]: “Wenn wir schweigen, werden wir unangenehm — wenn wir reden, werden wir lächerlich.” Herta Müller, *Herztier* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2009), 7; 252. Herta Müller, *Der König verneigt sich und tötet* (Frankfurt: Fischer-Taschenbuch-Verlag, 2010), 90–128.

future-oriented aspects of the texts and the role they play in the construction of a post-socialist memory in contemporary Europe, arguing that the features prescribed typically to trauma are functioning in a secondary way also.<sup>84</sup> In this chapter, I thus move away from the paradigm of autobiographical trauma without dismissing it altogether. I examine Müller's poetological strategy and the relation between content and form in her novel *Reisende auf einem Bein* with reference to her larger oeuvre, particularly the later novel *Herztier* and her collage poetry.

### **The strange gaze / *Der fremde Blick***

A strange atmosphere and objects are important to Müller's writing and are a defining aspect of her work. She alludes to a strange way of looking at the world that she calls the "fremde Blick" in an essay titled "Der fremde Blick oder Das Leben ist ein Furz in der Laterne" (1999).<sup>85</sup> She describes how this "strange" or "foreign gaze" is one that existed prior to her migration to West Germany, and that it cannot be explained merely by the autobiographical fact of being a foreigner in a new country. In her programmatic essay, Müller herself rejects a reading of her characters, and herself, however as "fremd" because they are immigrants and makes clear that the Strange Gaze is one that arose prior to her migration.

Ein fremdes Auge kommt in ein fremdes Land — mit dieser Feststellung geben sich viele zufrieden, außer mir. Denn diese Tatsache ist nicht der Grund für den *Fremden Blick*. Ich habe ihn mitgebracht aus dem Land, wo ich herkomme und alles kannte.

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<sup>84</sup> Áine McMurtry similarly shifts the focus away from a biographical reading. Áine Mcmurtry, "The Strange Everyday: Divided Berlin in Prose Texts by Herta Müller and Emine Sevgi Özdamar," *German Life and Letters* 71, no. 4 (October 2018): 473–94.

<sup>85</sup> Herta Müller, *Der fremde Blick oder das Leben ist ein Furz in der Laterne* (Göttingen: Wallstein-Verl, 2009).

A foreign eye comes to a foreign country – many are content with this assessment, besides me. Since this fact is not the reason for the *Strange Gaze*. I brought it with me from the country from which I came and where I knew everything.<sup>86</sup>

While the term *der fremde Blick* translates as the “strange gaze” or “foreign gaze,” I prefer the translation “strange gaze” since “foreign” could also lead to the conclusion that the gaze arises due to a migration story or being non-native to a place. While Müller is indeed a migrant to West Germany, and thus her works could be read under a migration lens, such a reading would miss the nuance that Müller draws out in this essay on the Strange Gaze. She claims that the different way of looking at the world according to the *fremden Blick* is a consequence of being politically persecuted and under constant surveillance by the Securitate. She elaborates, for example, that a bicycle can no longer be just a bicycle to her: In one of her interrogations by the secret police, a secret service officer threatened her indirectly by stating out of the blue that “es gibt auch Verkehrsunfälle” [traffic accidents also happen]. Five days upon buying a bicycle, Müller tells how a lorry knocked her down and that in the following interrogation the officer remarked “Ja, ja, es gibt wirklich Verkehrsunfälle” [Yes, yes traffic accidents really do happen].<sup>87</sup> Müller claims that the gaze thus arises through daily life under a suppressive regime which has resulted in someone perceiving commonplace objects (e.g., a bicycle) or events in a “strange” way<sup>88</sup> – much like her protagonists do (e.g., the *Ich-Erzählerin* of *Herztier* connection of a belt with

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<sup>86</sup> Müller, 5. Emphasis and translation my own. See also: “Er [der fremde Blick] hat mit dem Einwandern nach Deutschland nichts zu tun.” [It has nothing to do with immigrating to Germany], 12.

<sup>87</sup> Müller, 6. Translation my own.

<sup>88</sup> Müller, 11.

death). This strange gaze sees objects in ways where they do not relate to their usual function (i.e., a bike is not just a means of transport) but things become potential ominous threats.

*Der fremde Blick* does fit well with a trauma-based reading as the wounds of a past that haunt the present.<sup>89</sup> Yet, I am interested in looking how it functions poetologically in her texts, reading beyond *der fremde Blick* as only evidence of trauma to analyze how Müller engages it with a future-oriented impetus. In her elaboration of the Strange Gaze, Müller repeats that it arose from the circumstances of her biography: “Der fremde Blick hat [...] mit der Biographie [zu tun]” [the strange gaze is related to biography], emphasizing that it namely did not originate from an artistic writerly desire, but rather through her experience of persecution.<sup>90</sup> Although the majority of her protagonists have similar biographies where they live or have lived under a repressive regime (e.g., Irene in *Reisende auf einem Bein*; the female narrator in *Herztier*; the narrator of *Der Beamte sagte*) or spent time in a forced labor camp (Leo Auberg in *Atemschaukel* [2009]), I am not claiming that what Irene’s (or other protagonists) experiences are Müller’s own ones. Instead, I investigate how they may also see the world according to this *fremden Blick* and how it relates to post-socialist memory. I ask whether this Strange Gaze can function as a means to integrate memories of socialism into the memory discourse of a “unified Europe,” potentially as an answer to the dilemma the female narrator of her novel *Herztier* articulates regarding her memories of the Ceaușescu regime and how to negotiate them: “Mit den Wörtern im Mund

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<sup>89</sup> On trauma see for example Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), chap. Introduction.

<sup>90</sup> Müller, *Der fremde Blick oder das Leben ist ein Furz in der Laterne*, 25. Translation my own.

zertreten wir so viel mit den Füßen im Gras. Aber auch mit dem Schweigen” [The words in our mouths do as much damage as our feet on the grass. But so do our silences].<sup>91</sup>

In the novel *Reisende auf einem Bein*, I see strong evidence of the *fremden Blick* as a poetics. The novel’s title itself can be read according to the logic of the *fremden Blick* and indeed highlights what is at stake in the novel, namely the strange unclarity as to what things mean. Is “Reisende” to be understood as a plural or singular feminine noun? On the one hand, the feminine singular traveler could refer to the novel’s protagonist, Irene. On the other, perhaps Müller is making a wider claim to travelers or specifically migrants. The ambiguity in the title is elided in its English translation *Traveling on One Leg* which emphasizes the act of traveling rather than the person doing the traveling. Yet the question remains: Why the singular leg? And what does it mean “to travel on one leg”?

The phrase appears around halfway through the novel itself, in a passage where Irene and has travelled to a different city to visit a friend Franz and is staying at a hotel. After contemplating some graffiti, which she sees on the wall of a house from her hotel window, and after calling the number from the graffiti where a child answers and calls for their mother, Irene postulates:

Reisende, [ ...] Reisende mit dem erregten Blick auf die schlafenden Städte. [...] Hinter den Bewohnern her. Reisende auf einem Bein und auf dem anderen Verlorene. Reisende kommen zu spät.

Travelers, Irene thought, travelers with their nervous eyes on the sleeping cities. [...] They have their sights set on the inhabitants. Traveling on one leg, lost before they change to the other.

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<sup>91</sup> Müller, *Herztier*, 7. Herta Müller, *The Land of Green Plums*, trans. Michael Hofmann (London: Granta Books, 1999), 1.



Travelers are always late.<sup>92</sup>

The noun “Reisende” from the title is thus a quote from the novel itself, and if we read the title in light of this intratextual reference then “Reisende” is to be understood in its plural sense. While we cannot infer Müller’s intention in choosing this title and whether she wishes to make general claims about migrants and the migrant condition, or perhaps specifically of the post-socialist migrant, the ambiguity is characteristic of the text itself, and her writing in general. It is the ambiguity with which, I argue, she is making a claim or doing something and saying it is particular to those who have experienced persecution under state sponsored socialism.

But what is the contrast she is making between being on one leg or on the other? The chiasmic structure emphasizes the comparison Irene draws, putting “Reisende” and “Verlorene” into direct relation to one another. Describing the different legs, it is as though a person or people are walking, traveling, and as they step on one leg they are “Reisende” or “travelers” and when they step onto the other leg they are “Verlorene” or “lost ones.” The contrast that Irene makes between two legs is like a split or cut in perspective. When the person or people step on one leg, they have one way of looking at the world, and when they step on the other leg they have a different perspective. Müller is figuratively depicting two different perspectives as though one is standing on different legs. They are nonetheless somehow connected in this image i.e., through the body of the person walking and it as though there is a duality or ambiguity that shifts depending on which perspective is being offered, which leg is the one stepping out.

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<sup>92</sup> Herta Müller, *Reisende auf einem Bein* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2010), 98. Subsequent citations from the text will be indicated in parentheses with the abbreviation RB and the corresponding page number. Herta Müller, *Traveling on One Leg*, trans. Valentina Glajar and Andre LeFevre (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 80. Subsequent citations from the text will be indicated in parentheses with the abbreviation OL and the corresponding page number.

The contrast being drawn between “Verlorene” and “Reisende” comes to a head when Irene claims that travelers arrive late. I argue that this is a comment on Irene’s position as a previously persecuted person in the “other land” and that her traveling and leaving or fleeing came too late and that she was already lost on the one hand: Her perspective has already been changed or developed into one of a “Verlorene”, namely she had taken on the *fremden Blick*, and thus deviates from one who is not persecuted. In traveling however, a further perspective is gained, yet it is one that does not resolve or usurp the previous one (i.e., “Verlorene”/the *fremde Blick*) which is always there, perhaps as a traumatized one. Just that they are intertwined, such as in the chiasmic sentence structure, and cannot be fully separated but engage in a dialectical relation to one another and will always inform the world view: Irene cannot perceive things without the lenses of someone who has traveled, a migrant, or someone who has been persecuted, and is in her words lost.

### **Estranged Realism**

Beyond its traumatized aspect, the *fremde Blick* is reminiscent of Bertolt Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt* or *V-effekt* (estrangement effect), if not in its genesis but in its poetological function and impetus. Brecht describes the *V-effekt* as part of his aesthetic theory for his epic theater, elaborating in his essay *Das kleine Organon für das Theater* that it constitutes “[e]ine verfremdende Abbildung [...] eine solche, die den Gegenstand zwar erkennen, ihn aber doch zugleich fremd erscheinen läßt” [a representation that alienates [...] one which allows us to

recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar].<sup>93</sup> Brecht describes the use for the *V-effekt* in theater as a means to move away from Aristotelian drama, against empathy or identification (*Einfühlung*) with the portrayed world on the stage. Reflecting on his play *Leben des Galilei*, Brecht expounds on the purpose of developing a “fremden Blick”, namely so that “all dies Gegebene ihm [Galilei] als ebensoviel Zweifelhaftes erschienen könnte” [transform himself from general passive acceptance to a corresponding state of suspicious inquiry].<sup>94</sup> In this way, Brecht’s *V-effekte* seek to lead to critical engagement by the actors and audience themselves with the characters and the depicted fable.<sup>95</sup> Brecht’s conception of theater aims to show (*zeigen*) real society – specifically capitalist society – as something not predetermined or a given, but as a result of human processes, ultimately seeking to show how society is thus able to be changed. In this way, Brecht’s epic theater and the aesthetic of *Verfremdung* is future-oriented; it functions against a capitalist system and aimed towards a different future according to communist theory.

Müller’s *fremde Blick* differs to Brecht’s concept of *Verfremdung* certainly since it rises due to oppression from a particular system and not because of a political leaning. Moreover, she predominantly works in a different medium to Brecht who developed his theory in relation to theater. However, some affinity is clear between the two concepts. Archetype characters (e.g. der Lehrer) that do not possess a deeper psychological life are typical of Brechtian aesthetics. While

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<sup>93</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Kleines Organon für das Theater* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1960), 25. Bertolt Brecht, “A Short Organum for the Theater,” in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willet (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994), 192.

<sup>94</sup> Brecht, *Kleines Organon für das Theater*, 26. Brecht, “A Short Organum for the Theater,” 192.

<sup>95</sup> Brecht names the fable as the “Hauptgeschäft des Theaters” [main business of the theater]. Brecht, *Kleines Organon für das Theater*, 41. Brecht, “A Short Organum for the Theater,” 202.

Müller's characters are typically named, one figure that appears over and again throughout her oeuvre is only referred to by their profession, namely officials. Müller's most recent short narrative is indeed titled *Der Beamte sagte* [The Official Said, 2021] and consists of a narrative collage in the style of her poetry that depicts several encounters with an official. On the one hand, this could be depicting the faceless bureaucracy that her protagonists encountered in West Germany in terms of immigration officials. On the other hand, Irene the female protagonist of *Reisende auf einem Bein* similarly lacks a deeper psychological description, distancing her from the reader and preventing an identification with Irene. Müller creates a distance that undermines the reader potentially empathizing with Irene or other protagonists. *Reisende auf einem Bein* is not a psychological novel, and the surface level depiction of Irene differs greatly from usual autobiographies that represent trauma. While trauma is no doubt present as part of the emergence of Irene's *fremden Blick*, Müller is not just representing the trauma. In showing the effects and memory of living under a repressive regime through her prose (and poetry), Müller's *fremden Blick* entails a future-orientation to act as a warning and emphasizes the urgency to remember state socialism and the crimes committed under it.

Müller's writing could be categorized under a critical socialist realism whereby she depicts everyday life under state socialism that is urgently aimed against such a system that oppressed and surveilled its citizens. Her prose is distinct in nature since not much happens and the structure is heavily fragmented with an idea of the sense of time elapsing remaining unclear. In her explication of the *fremden Blick*, Müller specifies how *der fremde Blick* is to be understood as the opposite of an "*intakter Blick*."<sup>96</sup> Maria S. Grewe postulates that "it [*fremder Blick*] eludes the totality and cohesion of perception and experience" that is possible for an

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<sup>96</sup> Müller, *Der fremde Blick oder das Leben ist ein Furz in der Laterne*, 21.

*intakten Blick*.<sup>97</sup> I argue that this results in a hyperfocus on the detail and individual objects that translates into Müller's prose evincing an estranged realism. Items are no longer "vertraut" [familiar] as Müller states in her essay. They are not alienating in their foreignness as something unknown which she as someone from Eastern Europe does not know in the West. But rather because things that she knew became strange through day-to-day life under a dictatorship.<sup>98</sup>

### Object-laden Prose

Müller's static narration is a distinctive feature of her prose, which is emphasized by its staccato-like structure. Her prose (and poetry) is object heavy – by which I mean objects are often the subjects of Müller's sentences. It is also defined by short sentences, a rarity of conjunctions and is overall elliptical and abstruse. As her protagonist Irene writes on a postcard "seit ich hier lebe, ist das Detail größer als das Ganze" [RB 172; Since I've been living here the detail has been bigger than the whole, OL 145]. In the novel *Reisende auf einem Bein*, for example, the beginning of the fourth chapter begins with a description of an office in an Admissions Facility for migrants, with the narrator focusing on a curtain.

Der Vorhang bewegte sich.  
Der Vorhang bewegte sich, obwohl das Fenster geschlossen war und niemand  
eintrat, durch die Tür.  
Es waren ein weißer Spitzenvorhang, der aussah wie die billigen Vorhänge in  
Zimmern, in denen vieles zur gleichen Zeit geschieht.

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<sup>97</sup> Maria S. Grewe, "Imaging the East: Some Thoughts on Contemporary Minority Literature in Germany and Exoticist Discourse in Literary Criticism," in *Germany and the Imagined East*, ed. Lee M. Roberts (Interdisciplinary German Studies Conference, Newcastle, U.K: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2005), 77.

<sup>98</sup> Müller, *Der fremde Blick oder das Leben ist ein Furz in der Laterne*, 12.

Hier war ein Büro, hoch über den Bäumen am Ende der Stadt. Ein Büro im Übergangsheim.

Sie haben bestimmt gemerkt, sagte der Beamte, Sie befinden sich beim Bundesnachrichtendienst. Das ist kein Geheimnis. (RB 27)

The curtain moved.

The curtain moved even though the window was closed and nobody came in through the door.

It was a white lace curtain that looked like the cheap curtains in the rooms where things happen all at once.

This was an office high up above the trees at the end of the city. An office in the Admission Facility.

You know of course, said the official, that you are at the Federal Intelligence Service. This is not a secret. (OL 18)

The four-time repetition of “Vorhang” stands out, particularly in the first two instances where the entire first sentence “Der Vorhang bewegte sich” is repeated immediately at the start of the following paragraph. This emphasis of the curtain that is moving contrasts starkly to the stasis of the narrative where the “action” of the episode is not evident until the fifth paragraph when the official speaks, and the reader realizes that Irene is at a government agency in Germany. This is not the only contrast drawn: the action or movement of the curtain reflects the inaction of anybody, and indeed where the reader might expect to encounter a person or the protagonist of the novel, Irene, we read that nobody entered due to this movement.

The syntactical structure of the second sentence further emphasizes the objects in the narrative, highlighting the door as opposed to the potential person who is indicated by way of their lacking presence (“niemand”). Müller achieves this through separating the prepositional phrase “durch die Tür” with a comma from its syntactical position: “obwohl [...] niemand [*durch die Tür*] eintrat.” The comma however cuts the prepositional object from its logical place, rendering the subordinate clause itself somewhat strange or disjointed and the meaning unclear. One interpretation would be to read “durch die Tür” as separated from the main clause about the

curtain: “der Vorhang bewegte sich [...] durch die Tür”, thereby understanding the curtain to be hanging in the doorframe and being blown into the room. If we return to the subordinate clause in this interpretation of the sentence, one might understand the phrase “niemand eintrat” to be in a causal relation to the window being closed, namely nobody could enter *because* the window was closed. In this reading, the insertion of the subordinate clause disrupts the main clause, leading to an emphasis on the curtain and the door that makes them stand out as bookends to the entire sentence.

However, the prepositional phrase “durch die Tür” makes most semantic sense if it is read as belonging to the clause “niemand eintrat,” that is added as an afterthought or clarification to its antecedent clause. The two parts of the clause “niemand eintrat durch die Tür” are in a way cut and arranged quasi out of order. This leads to ambiguity and unclarity as to where it belongs or what it relates to, generating potential readings that are unusual yet nevertheless make sense according to the overall logic of the novel. The door is strange in its isolation, and the repetition of objects, with few qualifying adjectives, along with not much happening leads to a tense atmosphere or an uncanny tone that is underscored by the often cryptic sentences where the reader is not entirely sure what is happening.

This is similar to the style in Müller’s second novel *Herztier* [1994; *The Land of Green Plums*, 1996] where arbitrary objects that seem nondescript are linked to the death of the nameless female protagonist’s friends. At the beginning, the words are introduced and immediately put into a constellation with death, as the narrator [*Ich-Erzählerin*] tells how she cannot imagine or visualize a grave for her friends, but only a nut, belt, window, and rope.<sup>99</sup> It is generally unclear what this means and why these objects are related to her friends’ deaths. By the

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<sup>99</sup> Müller, *Herztier*, 7.

end of the novel, however, it becomes clear that these nouns are connected to the ways in which the protagonist's friends died and they take on a new meaning, a more sinister and loaded one that understands a "nut" is no longer just a "nut" in the world of the novel. The reader is continuously asked to read these words according to the logic of the narrator, whereby everyday objects do not merely signify what they represent, i.e., a nut is not the edible hard fruit, but rather a representation of Tereza's cancer, or a rope signifies Kurt's death who is found hanged.

Müller's prose is characteristically object driven and not heavy with dialogue. People are often described and are not actors themselves who engage with protagonists. In *Reisende auf einem Bein*, the narrative is quite solitary in its focalization through Irene. By solitary, I mean that episodes are predominantly non-narrative in the sense that they are descriptions of Irene in the city at the beginning or end of a particular movement or travel. Irene looks at the people she comes across in a somewhat detached way. She does not appear integrated into the narrative environment itself, but rather has a quasi-roaming gaze over what is happening, drawing the readers' attention to everyday objects that are described in a slightly out of joint manner.

The objects in Müller's texts take on their meaning according to how the respective protagonists understand or see the world. The novels are predominantly focalized through their perspectives and we the reader begin to understand their thoughts and gazes. The above excerpt from *Reisende auf einem Bein* in the Admissions Facility is focalized through Irene and not much information is given about the official or even Irene herself. The objects are what Irene notices as she is being interviewed by the official, and as seen in my reading of the phrase "durch die Tür" it is not always clear how we should read or understand the laconic text.

The disjunction or confusion between seemingly disparate objects and how they function in a given clause leads, furthermore, to multiple interpretations and possibilities. For



example, after the narrator describes the room in the Admissions Facility, the official remarks: “Sie haben bestimmt bemerkt [...] Sie befinden sich beim Bundesnachrichtendienst. Das ist kein Geheimnis” [RB 27; You know of course [...] that you are at the Federal Intelligence Service. This is not a secret. OL 18]. The official’s statement that Irene’s whereabouts is not a secret stands out since it is starkly unclear to the reader where Irene is, what is entirely going on in this episode, and even who is being addressed since Irene is not named but merely addressed in the Sie-form at this point of the chapter. Only through the surrounding contextual information that Irene is the focal point of the narrative do we assume that the “Sie” is referring to Irene. The officer’s certainty and assurance (“bestimmt”) that Irene – and to a certain extent the reader who is also addressed through the Sie-pronoun – has noticed where she is, contrasts with the generally tense atmosphere that is evoked. This leads to a suspicious mode of reading whereby the words “Dienst” and “Geheimnis” stand out and emphasize the suspense of the episode. The semantic slippage that occurs when disparate phrases (such as in the “durch die Tür” case ) can be read as belonging to several parts of a sentence at one and the same time can also happen on the level of individual nouns: The “-dienst” of “Bundesnachrichtendienst” can be understood, therefore, as agreeing with or belonging to “Geheimnis,” thereby forming the composite noun “Geheimdienst” i.e., secret service that remains unsaid at the same time.

This subtext fits on a thematic level, yet it is also incongruous at the same time since Irene has migrated away from “the other land” where she was threatened by the secret police. Indeed, a few sentences later the official asks Irene if she had any contact with the secret service in her homeland. The official thus contributes to the uneasy atmosphere rather than being a fully-fledged character – as is the case with many of Müller’s characters i.e., they remain one dimensional. Through indicating the possibility of a secret police through the proximity of its

composites together with the explicit mentioning of the “other land’s” secret police, the narrator establishes a similar horizon for reading interactions and environments in West Germany, namely by undermining a narrative of “all is safe now.” The continuity or perhaps lack of stark contrasts between “the other land” and West Germany is reinforced by Irene’s comparison between the similar suits of bureaucrats in both countries. Since the novel is focalized through Irene, I argue, that the narrator is not attempting to show that the two countries are similar but rather what is being emphasized is that, for Irene, the same way of seeing the world persists even after her migration.

## **Perspective**

Müller alludes to the variety of different perspectives with a further reference to walking or movement. Irene is walking in the park, observing people lounging as well as a man who is also people watching, looking longer at the women than men. Amid her description of this man’s wristwatch, Irene is struck by a reflection (Strahl) from it that touches her brow “wie ein Schuß” [RB 116; like a shot OL 96]. The refracted light from the sun leads to a strange shift of orientation for Irene, where she describes the environment surrounding her as suddenly being upside down: “Die Bäume drehten sich. Standen mit den Kronen eine Weile zwischen den Liegenden. Irene ging auf dem Kopf” [RB 116; The trees were turning upside down. For a while they stood on their crowns between the people lying around. Irene walked on her head. OL 96]. At first glance, it appears that the world has turned upside down as the trees are now turned on their heads. However, Irene contrasts this with the people who she describes as still lying down, highlighting that it is only the trees and by extension the environment around Irene that has

changed since she is now walking “on her head.” But what does it actually mean to walk on one’s head? Is it related to Müller’s description of walking on one leg as a traveler and on the other leg as someone lost?

The phrase “ging auf dem Kopf” is strange if we understand it literally, that Irene is suddenly turned upside down and walks on her head. Perhaps Irene is experiencing vertigo or indeed is physically upside down, i.e., she did a headstand. However, I argue the literal interpretation is too simple and more is at work in this passage since Müller alludes to Irene’s way of seeing the world or her perspective by means of an intertextual reference. The strange act of “walking on her head” refers, I believe, to Georg Büchner’s short prose text *Lenz* [1839], in which the eponymous protagonist wishes to walk on his head: “[N]ur war es ihm manchmal unangenehm, dass er nicht *auf dem Kopf gehn* konnte” [only sometimes it struck him as unpleasant that he could not *walk on his head*].<sup>100</sup> What convinces me even more that this is a direct reference to Büchner’s *Lenz* is that as Irene continues her walk through the park, she encounters a man on a bench who is shouting “Georg” into the park (RB 117; OL 97). In *Lenz*, Büchner relates the Storm and Stress writer Jakob Michael Reinhold Lenz’s (1751-1792) worsening psychological state of mind, based on a report by the pastor Johann Friedrich Oberlin from which Büchner cites. The latter’s fictional Lenz is roaming through mountainous landscape, apathetically at first and then, finding his environment threatening, seized by fear into inner turmoil. Like Müller’s *Reisende auf einem Bein*, Büchner’s text is object heavy with few verbs and long passages depicting the landscape.

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<sup>100</sup> Georg Büchner, “Lenz,” in *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Gerhard P. Knapp and Herbert Wender, Goldmann-Taschenbuch Goldmann-Klassiker (München: Goldmann, 2002), 99. Georg Büchner, *Lenz*, trans. Michael Hamburger (Richmond, Surrey: Alma Classics, 2015), 3. Emphasis added.

In *Lenz*, the relationship between reality and thought, or how Lenz perceives things is continuously questioned in the narrative fragment, with the phrase “es war ihm als” emphasizing this disjunction. Along with similar Lenzian jumps in time and space in Müller’s novel, there is a similar contrast between how the narrator presents the narrative world and how Irene the protagonist in turn sees it. It highlights the internal focalization of Irene and the discrepancy with the outside empirical narrative world. We see how the world appears to Irene, leading to a narrative defined by a logic of “es war *ihr* als” or “it seemed *to her* as though.”

Contrasting the other people in the park as still lying but next to treetops shows how not everything was turned upside down for Irene. It reveals that Irene’s is a highly subjective position where she herself is the one turned upside down, resulting in Irene only being able to see the object world as also turned on its head but not the other people, the other subjective beings. They remain in their original position i.e., lying on the ground. Like Büchner’s Lenz, Irene’s perspective is shifted and highly subjective, and the reader is confronted with her view through this internal focalization.

Irene’s reality contrasts starkly with the empirical world of the narrative, for example, as she is leaving the park after shouting Georg: “Irene trug eine Tüte. Sie knisterte, als seien die Beine, der Weg, aus Plastik und dünn. Und die Schuhe nicht stark” [RB 117; Irene carried a bag. It rustled as if her legs and the path were thin and made of plastic. And the shoes not strong. OL 97]. The use of “als” and the subjunctive mood immediately alerts us to the internally focalized perspective, perhaps an explanation for the strange construction of the sentence. For, it is not entirely clear what the pronoun “sie” is indeed referring to as subject of the verb “knisterte”. Logically, it makes most sense for its antecedent to be “eine Tüte” due to the meanings of the words, i.e., the bag is rustling. However, grammatically the pronoun “sie” could refer to Irene,

and indeed appears to since in the subsequent clause Irene's legs are the subject. Her observation is strange and there is a transfer or overlapping that takes place where the sound from one object, the plastic bag, is transferred to her legs or the path itself, leading her to the thought that it is as though she herself is made from plastic and thin. There is a rupture or disconnect between the ephemeral sound and the object that produces it.

Müller repeatedly emphasizes the different ways of looking and being in the world throughout the novel. When Irene visits her friend Franz, she highlights the difference in perspective between Irene who, as I have argued, embodies the perspectives of both a "Verlorene" and "Reisende." She perceives everyday objects or actions as strange and/or threatening, in that they are narrated as ordinary and then either through direct or indirect speech Irene's perception is revealed. While she visits Franz in a town in West Germany the narrator describes how a line of parked cars and the pavement are covered in large yellow leaves, leaving the pavement so thickly covered that the narrator describes the pavement itself as moving up and down as they stepped on it.<sup>101</sup> Her estranged relationship to her environment is made apparent through the physical reaction she has to it, whereby the narrator tells that Irene is freezing because of the softness of the pavement (RB 91).

In the English translation of *Reisende auf einem Bein* these two sentences about the leaves and the soft pavement are not translated, and I argue that an essential part of Müller's text is lost. Irene is only described as freezing without the causal relationship to the world around her, specifically the leaves on the ground that make the pavement soft. The strangeness of the soft pavement being the reason why she is freezing is important for the tone or strangeness that permeates the novel, alerting the reader to Irene's perception being peculiar. The described chill

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<sup>101</sup> "Und der Gehsteig war so dick mit Blättern belegt, dass er sich hob und senkte unter den Schritten." Müller, *Reisende auf einem Bein*, 91. This sentence is omitted in the English translation.

because of her environment lends her interpretation or view of the parked cars as “like graves” a sinister tone, especially when it is subsequently contrasted with Franz’s view of the parked cars as being decorated (RB 91f.). While these ways of seeing (decoration versus graves) are not necessarily mutually exclusive, the discrepancy between what the thing is “car” and Irene’s perception of the car “a grave” is emphasized through Franz’s contrasting observation.

In conclusion to looking at the same visual of the leaf bestrewn cars as Franz, Irene sums up stating “Das eine ist mein Bild, das andere ist dein Bild [...] Dazwischen gibt es nichts” [RB 92; One is my picture, the other is yours [...] There is nothing in between. OL 74]. This episode, and Irene’s summary, is programmatic for *Reisende auf einem Bein* and Müller’s work at large. The object-heavy narrative creates environments where Irene’s way of looking at the world according to the *fremden Blick* is made apparent which results in what may appear strange connections. Irene becomes estranged (*verfremdet*) and alienated (*entfremdet*) from what is happening around her.

## **Non-Narrative**

Towards the end of *Reisende auf einem Bein*, Irene travels to Marburg to visit Franz, a young West German student whom she met at the beginning of the novel while still in what Irene refers to as “das andere Land” — the unnamed country, identifiable as Ceaușescu’s Romania. While Irene’s journey in this chapter may appear to be a typical narrative event — visiting a friend and traveling to another town — Müller’s novel ultimately fails to narrate this episode. Instead, Irene makes a series of observations once she has arrived in the town, without the reader ever learning more about Irene’s visit and the assumed eventual encounter with Franz:

Irene hatte das Gefühl, durch ihren Blick auf diese Städte, die Menschen, die ihr nahestanden, von den Städten zu entfernen. Sie gab sich Mühe, ihre Fremdheit nicht zu zeigen.

Doch die Menschen, die Irene nahestanden, ließen keine Gelegenheit aus, ihr zu zeigen, wie nahe ihnen diese Städte standen. [...]

Sie kauften sehr rasch ein. Bestellten sofort einen Kaffee. Berührten im Vorbeigehen Schaufenster, Wände und Zäune. In den Parks rissen sie vom ersten Strauch ein Blatt ab. Nahmen das Blatt sogar in den Mund. Auf Brücken ließen sie Steine ins Wasser fallen. Auf Plätzen setzten sie sich auf die erste Bank. Schauten nicht um sich. Fingen sofort an zu reden. [...]

In diesen Augenblicken wusste Irene, dass ihr Leben zu Beobachtungen geronnen war. Die Beobachtungen machten sie *handlungsunfähig*. (RB 146f. Emphasis added)

Irene had the feeling that by looking at these towns she removed the people close to her from them. She tried hard not to show how strange she felt.

But the people close to Irene let no occasion slip by to show how close they felt to these towns. [...]

They were shopping very fast. They ordered coffee at once. They touched store windows, walls, and fences when passing by. They would tear leaves from the first bush in a park. They would even put a leaf in their mouths. They would let stones fall into the water from bridges. They would sit down on the first bench in squares. They didn't look around. They started speaking immediately. [...]

In moments like these Irene realized her life had run down to observations. Observations rendered her *unable to act*. (OL 123f.)

The paratactic list of actions emphasizes the stark contrast between Irene's inactivity, or immobility, and the activity of the people close to her. Similarly, the prominence given to objects being the "first" ("vom ersten Strauch", "auf die erste Bank"), the omission of several grammatical subjects, and the various adverbs or adverbial phrases (e.g. "rasch", "sofort", "im Vorbeigehen") – which Müller generally does not use in sentences in which Irene is the subject<sup>102</sup> – accelerate the pace of the paragraphs, highlighting the swarm of activity of those who show they are "close to the town." The speed of the people and this passage contrasts with the slow narrative flow in the

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<sup>102</sup> E.g., "Irene zog die Strümpfe und Schuhe an. / Sie ging den kürzeren Weg durch den Park. [...]" / Irene trug eine Tüte" [RB 117; Irene put on her stockings and her shoes. / She walked the shorter way through the park [...] / Irene carried a bag, OL 97].

rest of the novel, differentiating Irene and the laconic prose that is focalized through her, from them.

Irene herself is “handlungsunfähig,” as she states, and remains a stationary observer. Her inability to act also mirrors the general lack of narrative plot within the novel itself. Apart from a loose temporal trajectory from the first two chapters set in “the other country,” to Irene’s life in West Germany, and to the end of the novel where Irene learns she has been granted German citizenship, there is little plot within the nineteen chapters of *Reisende auf einem Bein*. Furthermore, each chapter itself contains individual episodes that do not seemingly relate to or follow on from one another, and themselves do not narrate events fully, seen for example in the non-event of Irene’s visit to Franz.

Despite the apparent resolution of Irene’s “problem” by means of her attainment of German citizenship, the unconnected nature of individual episodes and chapters undermines a reading of an overarching progressing narrative and its eventual denouement. The plot line instead provides the novel with some linearity and reveals that a significant amount of time has passed since the initial encounter with Franz at the beginning of the novel in “the other country”. However, the lack of connections between chapters renders them a series of snapshots of moments from Irene’s life from “the other country,” i.e., Romania, to West Berlin that have simply been narrated chronologically.

While Müller’s text is attributed to a narrative genre, the novel, *Reisende auf einem Bein* and her prose works at large are characteristically paratactic, with scarce transitions and jump-cut like instances where protagonists are suddenly narrated to be in a different place.<sup>103</sup>

The novels, while narrated largely chronologically, with a few flashbacks or narrative of past

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<sup>103</sup> E.g., In chapter 13, Irene is initially in the supermarket, leaves and makes a remark on summer and all of a sudden is in the middle of a park. Müller, *Reisende auf einem Bein*, 115. Müller, *Traveling on One Leg*, 95.



events, similarly do not always make it clear when and where the respective protagonist is. In *Reisende auf einem Bein*, for example, we often read that Irene is now in a train, or plane or at the Admissions Facility, and it remains unclear how much time has passed in relation to the preceding chapter or episode. Despite its general chronology, Müller's writing consists of many passages that are non sequitur and more descriptive than narrative. In this way, her text resists the typical teleology of a narrative and instead consists of episodic passages that are quasi "collaged" together. The narrative does not seem to go anywhere, leading Lilla Ballint to describe Müller's texts as evincing a type of "antinarrativity" that "unplots" and resists a narrative of progress.<sup>104</sup>

While Ballint therefore concludes that Müller's non-teleological antinarrative approach "elegantly sidelines the potential futurity of literature,"<sup>105</sup> I claim that her atypical narrative style does not necessarily preclude a futural orientation in her work.<sup>106</sup> The static and stationary style contrasts starkly with the many metaphors and images of movement – not to mention the dynamicism of memory at work in its multidirectionality – (e.g., "ging auf dem Kopf"; "Reisende") as well as the many references to transport that Müller employs when describing her work.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Unplotting as a narrative device "sacrifices the story for the sake of its episodes," according to Balint, and deprives possible episodes that could be "turning points" in a narrative "of their dramatic potential," thus forgoing logical coherence and a linear sequence of events. Lilla Ballint, "Ruins of Utopia: History, Memory, and the Novel after 1989" (Stanford University, 2014), 23–24.

<sup>105</sup> Ballint, 27–28; 35.

<sup>106</sup> A special issue of *German Life and Letters* looks at Müller's work in terms of its relevance for the present. Jenny Watson et al., eds., "Herta Müller and the Currents of European History: A Special Number," *German Life and Letters* 73, no. 1 (2020): 1–160, <https://doi.org/10.1111/glal.12237>.

<sup>107</sup> See for example the essay "Das Echo im Kopf" in *Im Heimweh ist ein blauer Saal*. Herta Müller, *Im Heimweh ist ein blauer Saal* (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2019). The essay is in the first pages. The pages of the volume are not numbered.

## Montage/Collage

The relationship between content and form in Müller's text is highly suggestive of her poetics, where content – life after political persecution – is reflected and affects the novel's form. Müller's poetological strategy of the *fremden Blick* and the corresponding "static" style play out not only structurally on the level of syntax but also in the form of the novel too. Where the novel's obscure style works against a clear-cut narrative and a teleology, its form functions similarly. As previously mentioned, there is little plot, chapters are not sequential, and they do not provide contextual information about how much time elapses between each chapter, thus rendering the novel sequential episodes that are montaged together.

The practice of montage productively works to place elements together that do not seemingly have a relation to one another. It shows that something else is at work rather than a mere absence of plot since the elements work with one other to create resonances with the individual parts. Patrizia McBride argues in her book on montage aesthetics in Weimar Germany, that while one could remain on an allegorical level that understands narrative montage to force readers to find meaning in each fragment and the whole in a hermeneutic manner, montage also does something on a formal level too.<sup>108</sup>

Müller uses the form of the novel in *Reisende auf einem Bein* and in many other works (e.g., *Herztier*, *Atemschaukel*, *Der Beamte sagte*), a genre that often gives an idea of completeness

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<sup>108</sup> Patrizia C. McBride, *The Chatter of the Visible: Montage and Narrative in Weimar Germany* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 4–5.

due to its closed form. Through employing a poetic of narrative montage, however, she works to undermine the form of the novel itself by destabilizing the “wholeness” and totality inherent in the form. She thus avoids creating something that can be read as a teleological master narrative, which were prevalent in the Eastern Bloc countries in their legitimization of state socialism. The narrative gaps between chapters and episodes leaves room and signals that not all is contained in this novel as a complete narrative, perhaps highlighting the subjective position of Irene.

From its early practice as a modern art form, (photo)montage “challenge[d] the dubious claim to objectivity often associated with [photography]” and the mixing of media and their materiality were of extreme significance.<sup>109</sup> Müller’s practice of making poems by collaging cut up words from magazines and newspapers reveals that she is also interested in the materiality of text, and by extension language. In recent years, she has almost exclusively been publishing collage poetry: *Im Haarknoten wohnt eine Dame* [2000], *Die blassen Herren mit den Mokkatassen* [2005], *Este sau ne iste Ion* [2005], *Vater telefoniert mit den Fliegen* [2012], *Im Heimweh ist ein blauer Saal* [2019]. The form of her collage poetry is distinct. They are made up of scans or images depicting the authors collaged creations. Each collage poem is made up of words cut from magazines, newspapers, etc. that Müller sticks onto a white postcard. As a result, the words appear in various colors, type, size, and the cuts are visible from where she sticks words together. Each poem is typically accompanied by an image that is similarly taken from various print media and is usually itself a composite of several images, often cut out limbs or parts of a body or an animal – for example the first image in *Die blassen Herren mit den Mokkatassen* consists of a person’s silhouette, cut out blue blazer on one side of the body and a

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<sup>109</sup> McBride, 3.

rabbit on the other side of the torso and a door/building underneath the rabbit, together with a separately cut out pair of trousers, fragmented head, and torso.<sup>110</sup> It is not clear in what relation the image stands to the text: Whether the image is to be read as elucidatory to the text, or as part of the overall collage poem itself as a visual element of the overall text.

Looking at the form and actual physicality of the book, there are no page numbers, contents, or titles for the poems in *Mokkatassen*. The poems appear as scans or photos of collage texts – similar to a composite that Irene creates in *Reisende auf einem Bein*. This begs the questions how are we supposed to read these texts? Are they in relation to one another? Perhaps since they are ordered in a book, but can they be read as standalone poems? And what of the collaged images? Are they illustrations that illuminate a sense behind the words? Or do they function like emblem images? While these questions seemingly only pertain to Müller's poetry, the practice and references to collage making in her prose reveal that such concerns are pertinent to her oeuvre and poetics at large.

In *Reisende auf einem Bein*, although it is pure text with no printed images, one episode stands out considering the novel's montage-like form and Müller's own collage poetry in which Irene creates her own collage/montage. Shortly after arriving at her new apartment in West Germany, Irene purchases a black and white postcard of a swimming pool. The narrator describes the composition, on which there is a chess board at the edge of the pool and the chess players are in the water. Irene describes the players as thinking and looking directly into the camera/picture, claiming that these chess players are the object of the picture.<sup>111</sup> What strikes Irene, however, is a

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<sup>110</sup> Herta Müller, *Die Blassen Herren mit den Mokkatassen* (München: C. Hanser, 2005). This image belongs to the first poem. The pages of the volume are not numbered.

<sup>111</sup> "Sie dachten nach. Sie sahen direkt ins Bild" RB, 48; They were thinking. They looked straight into the picture, OL, 36.

man who is sitting to the side, and she describes him as not belonging to the picture. After cutting the man out, Irene places the man in an envelope and sends it to her friend, leaving the remainder of the postcard on the table where suddenly a new image, or rather a collage, appears, leading Irene to cut more images out of the magazines.

Irene schnitt Photos aus Zeitungen aus. Die Ränder waren selten gerade geschnitten. Daher waren sie selten schwarz. Wo Irenes Hand gezittert hatte, sah der Rand so aus, als nehme die Zeitung das Photo zurück ins Papier (RB 50)

Irene cut out newspaper pictures. She rarely cut the edges straight. Which meant they were rarely black. The edge looked as if the newspaper was about to take the picture back into the paper where Irene's hand trembled (OL 37)

The narrator highlights the materiality of the photos through the description of the edges. In this way, they draw attention to the presence of Irene who enacted and created the collage through making these cuts. Her trembling hand suggests unease, perhaps due to the strange thought she has that “the newspaper was about to take the picture back.” The subjunctive indicates that this is Irene's thought, not the narrator, and is striking in its strangeness since the newspaper becomes an active subject in the subordinate clause. Irene perceives this way according to the *fremden Blick*, and her perception mirrors how the edges described; it is namely “selten gerade.”

The cuts in Müller's collage poetry – sometimes within individual words – and the “cuts” between various episodes in chapters where the narrative seemingly jumps create empty space. Perhaps this space signals space for forgetting, the things that Irene no longer remembers. Or I suggest, it relates back to the *fremden Blick* as a no longer “intakter Blick.” Her perception is no longer intact, instead resembling the fuzzy, not straight edges of the photos Irene cuts.

Moreover, in *Reisende auf einem Bein*, positionality is emphasized, namely that according to Irene (“für Irene”) the man is the object of the postcard. The man functions like the *punctum*

that Roland Barthes theorizes in *Camera Lucida*, a detail that Barthes describes as an “accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).”<sup>112</sup> Barthes description of the *punctum* resembles an injury, something that causes a physical reaction, it bruises and there is a physicality to it. One could read Irene’s fragmented narration and approach as symptomatic of the traumatized aspect of *der fremden Blick*, the *punctum* thus signaling the trauma wound. Yet, Barthes also describes the strange temporality of a photograph as pertaining to the anterior future – depicting a past and a future in one image, knowing that the depicted are frozen in a time that is the past but at the same time they are dead in the time of the beholder i.e., in the depicted person’s future.

Highlighting the positionality of the beholder and the indexicality, Margaret Olin expands Barthes’s theory and has described this relation with her theory of the “performative index” whereby the relationship between the photograph and the viewer is defined by the beholder’s own perspective.<sup>113</sup> As Irene comes from Eastern Europe and lived under state socialism could her perspective be a post-socialist beholding? Irene cannot just look at the photo and see a chess player but something else strikes her. The narrator goes on to describe Irene’s thoughts on the card:

Die Karte der Schachspieler war *für Irene* die Karte des Mannes, der abseits saß.  
Nur so wurde die Karte ein Geschehen, das nicht zu Ende war. (RB 48, my emphasis)

*For Irene* the chess players’ postcard was the postcard of the man sitting to the side. Only this way did the postcard become unfinished. (OL 36, my emphasis)

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<sup>112</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 27.

<sup>113</sup> Margaret Olin, *Touching Photographs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 69.

Through the performativity of Irene's perspective of the card, the card becomes an event that is open-ended. Due to the relationship between Irene, the image, and the materiality of the postcard it leads to an openness or potentiality for Irene. The *punctum* in *Reisende auf einem Bein* is thus something that strikes and leaves an impression that allows the action to continue beyond a static frozen photo or narrative. It becomes something else, with Irene explaining that something happened with the man. Although there is no causal link made, it seems that this leads Irene to cut the man out. This cut into the postcard and the image signals a cut into one representation, turning it into another and transforming it, releasing its potentiality. In terms of the novel's static prose, the prose remains static but, in its *punctum*, and signaling between the gaps of the montage, a movement is created that signals outside of the surface of the text. Potentiality is inherently futural and Müller's work, her narrative, and texts are saturated with this inherent futurity. Her writing and collages take objects, events, and memories and transform them, creating or signaling to new connections. But what is the direction of this futural impetus and potentiality?

### **Eastern vs Western Europe**

Through breaking up the narrative by means of montage/collage or defying narrative altogether, Müller undermines potential readings that understand Irene's journey from the Socialist Republic of Romania (1947-1989) to the Federal Republic of Germany (1949-1990) as one of simple progression and as the ultimate resolution of the difficulties and intimidations that resulted from living in the Soviet-aligned Eastern Bloc. In this manner, Müller pushes back against the

prevalent readings that understand the fall of state socialism and the subsequent emergence of liberal democracies in Eastern Europe teleologically.<sup>114</sup>

Müller emphasizes this point through references to the similarities, or rather the lack of “expected” antitheses, between the two countries despite their different political systems. In chapter four, for example, as an official from the Federal Intelligence Service questions Irene in a temporary home (Übergangsheim), she observes that the official is wearing a suit “wie Irene sie kannte aus dem anderen Land” [of the type Irene remembered from the other country] and that she recognizes his demeanor from her interactions with state officials before her emigration (RB 27f.; OL 18f.). In this way, Müller highlights the potential arbitrariness of the delimitation Western/Eastern Europe, questioning what the geographic categories of “East” and “West” refer to, and why they supposedly signify complete opposites.

Müller further suggests a performance of (perhaps non-existent) difference regarding Eastern and Western Europe through a passing reference to the constellation in Germany as a particularly tangible point where the Cold War divide is felt: “Eine Wolke war dünn und zerbrochen. Sie kam aus dem anderen Teil der Stadt. Aus dem anderen Staat herüber” [RB 32; A cloud was thin and broken. It came from the other part of the city. From the other state OL 22]. Introduced through free indirect speech (*erlebte Rede*), Irene contemplates that the landscape around a S-Bahn stop near the home for people seeking asylum (Asylantenheim), where she is living, constitutes “ein Bühnenbild für das Verbrechen” [RB 31; It was a stage set for crimes OL 22]. Although the country and city in which Irene is living after her emigration is never explicitly mentioned, multiple geographical references throughout the novel (e.g., “die Mauer”;

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<sup>114</sup> For example, in discussions of “post-communism” which understand the term as a teleological transitional period from state socialism to liberal democracy. Cf. Boris Buden, *Zone des Übergangs: Vom Ende des Postkommunismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2009).



“Gedächtniskirche” RB 31, 36; OL 22, 26) make it clear that this she is in Berlin, and she explicitly names the S-Bahn station as “Wilhelmsruh” (RB 32; OL 22). The cloud indicates the nonsensicality of this arbitrary border since the cloud, as part of this play, is said to hail from another state, but at the same time belongs to the setting of the play that takes place and is named after a S-Bahn stop in the West, “Wilhelmsruh” (RB 32; OL 22). Müller’s choice of Wilhelmsruh as the name for the play Irene ponders is also particularly interesting: Due to the station’s location directly on the border between East and West Berlin it was only accessible by West Berliners and thus cut off from the eponymous district in Pankow that lay beyond the Wall in the East.

This geographic context is furthermore reflected in the paragraph about the cloud on the level of sentence structure since the final sentence — “Aus dem anderen Staat herüber” — can only make sense if read together with the preceding one. However, it remains a fragmentary sentence rather than being connected through a conjunction to the subject and verb that render it comprehensible. The full stop thus structurally depicts the separation imposed by the immediate context of the Wall in Berlin and the larger Cold War divide in general.

While “the other state” is a clear reference to the GDR, could it metonymically stand in for the East? Is it showing that on one level things are not so neatly divided and separated but they are permeable by environmental factors or movements, i.e., in terms of migrants. And in terms of memory, too? The cloud in its non-solidness with “fuzzy” edges functions as a metaphor for memory that comes from the East. It is separated on the one hand by the different systems either side of the iron curtain that is depicted on the sentence level as a full stop, but the cloud shows how it is not possible to separate everything in this way. Intellectual ideas and memory do not stay neatly packed away. In this way, a tension emerges between the static narrative in which “nothing” happens and the dynamisms of migratory movement of the cloud.

## Against Totalitarianism

Similar to Irene's reading of the postcard and what she perceives as its subject, the narrative of *Reisende auf einem Bein* appears to have one thing as the main topic – Irene's arrival and life in the unnamed new country and city that are identifiable as West Germany in the late 1980s. However, the details or even the empty spaces between the episodes, the *puncta*, are also at stake in Müller's novel. A key theme for the novel is seen in the things that lie "abseits" and that the narrator or Irene signals towards, namely the potentiality for future totalitarianism that Müller writes and speaks against in her essays, speeches, and texts.

While making one of her collages, Irene takes a leftover photo of a dead politician and puts it in her pocket as she goes on a walk. Then, Irene crumples the photo and drops it into a bin. In doing this, Irene is overcome with a strange feeling:

Dann fing Irene das Gefühl ein, es könnte plötzlich alles anders werden in der Stadt. Die alten Frauen mit den weißen Dauerwellen, polierten Gehstöcken und Gesundschuhen könnten plötzlich wieder jung sein und in den Bund Deutscher Mädchen marschieren. Es würden lange, fensterlose Wagen vor die Ladentüren fahren. Männer in Uniformen würden die Waren aus den Regalen beschlagnahmen. Und in den Zeitungen würden Gesetze erscheinen wie in dem anderen Land. (RB 52f.)

Then Irene was captured by the feeling that everything could suddenly change in the city. The old women with their white perms, polished walking sticks, and healthy shoes would suddenly be young again and march in the League of German Girls. Long, windowless cars would drive up to the doors of stores. Men in uniform would confiscate the merchandise on the shelves. And in the newspapers laws would appear like those in the other country. (OL 40)

Irene who constantly carries the memory of her experience under state socialism with her in her *fremden Blick*, is struck by the potential for totalitarianism in the place she has sought refuge in through remembering its past. She refers to Nazi Germany through imagining the old ladies as members of “Bund Deutscher Mädel,” the girls’ branch of the Hitler Youth organization (*Hitlerjugend*) and alluding to the antisemitic and discriminatory laws of the 1930s. Through this allusion to Nazi Germany and the Holocaust, Müller links Irene’s narrative of state socialism in Romania to the dominant memory paradigm in Germany and Europe. She directly compares Germany’s past with Romania’s narrative present (“wie in dem anderen Land”) in the novel. The comparison does not function competitively, but highlights resonances between two repressive regimes: one from the past and one in her present. The speed with which Irene was overcome by this feeling brings a sense of urgency and a warning to the text, perhaps warning how seemingly quickly such regimes can take hold. She reminds of totalitarianism of the past through connecting to the present and reminding that, at the time of its publication in 1989, repressive regimes still existed in Europe.

## Chapter 2: Entangled Memory: Nino Haratischwili's Generational Expansion of the *Nationalgeschichte*

### *Das achte Leben (für Brilka)*

In her 1279-page novel *Das achte Leben (für Brilka)* [2014; *The Eighth Life (for Brilka)*], Nino Haratischwili traces the legacy of twentieth century European history — from Tsarist Russia and the two World Wars to the demise of the Soviet Union — through focusing on its implications for a particular fictional family and their native country of Georgia.<sup>115</sup> The novel is framed as a written account of the Jaschi family's history narrated by Niza Jaschi for her twelve-year-old niece Brilka, as indicated in the parentheses of the novel's title.

*Das achte Leben* is divided into a prologue and eight books, with each book dedicated to a particular family member. Focalized through Niza's retellings, each book tells the threads of each family member in a complex, predominantly chronological narrative that takes place across Europe. The first book of the novel begins with the narrator's great-grandmother Stasia in 1900 in Georgia; the second book deals with Stasia's sister Christine and her interactions with leading Soviet politicians; the third with Stasia's son Kostja and his time in the Soviet navy as the Soviet Union entered the Second World War; the focus of book four is Stasia's second child Kitty's story, namely her emigration to Western Europe via Prague; book five is about the narrator's

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<sup>115</sup> Nino Haratischwili, *Das achte Leben (für Brilka)* (Frankfurt am Main: Ullstein, 2018). Subsequent citations from the text will be indicated in parentheses with the abbreviation AL and the corresponding page number. Nino Haratischwili, *The Eighth Life (For Brilka)*, trans. Charlotte Collins and Ruth Martin (London: Scribe, 2019). Subsequent citations of the translation will be indicated with the abbreviation EL and the corresponding page number.

mother Elene's teenage years in Moscow and Tbilisi; book six narrates Daria's story, who is Elene's first born daughter and the titular Brilka's mother and the collapse of the USSR; in book seven, Niza tells of her own story in the third person in Berlin from the 1990s until the narrative present (ca. 2007). The final book is left as a blank page for Brilka, who Niza describes in the prologue as traveling on a train through Germany in search of their family's history.

Through her *Generationenroman* [generational novel], I argue in this chapter that Haratschwili inserts a fictional family's memories into real socio-historical events to offer a counter to both a male-centered and a Western view of history. The generational narrative affords a long perspective that shows multidirectionality at work whereby memories from one history of violence are entangled with another, migrating into, and becoming part of the collective memory.

### **Nino Haratschwili**

Born in Tbilisi, Georgia in 1983, Nino Haratschwili is a Georgian author based in Germany. Spending most of her childhood in her native country, she lived, however, in Germany for two years as an adolescent. Due to economic instability in the 1990s as Georgia emerged from the collapse of the Soviet Union and established independence for the first time since 1921, her parents emigrated abroad for work. Her mother moved to Germany in 1993, and her father to Ukraine. Haratschwili herself joined her mother in 1995 for two years in a small village in North-Rhein Westphalia until she returned to Georgia at 14 years old. After this stay, she

describes that she had become “more western” and “foreign” in Georgia.<sup>116</sup> She attended a high school that had an emphasis on German in Tbilisi, where she founded a Georgian-German theater group that became the later “Fliedertheater” company. In 2003, the author moved to Hamburg to study theater directing (*Theaterregie*) and has lived in Germany ever since. Her first novel published in Germany was *Juja* [2010], followed by several much longer ones: *Mein sanfter Zwilling* [2011], *Das achte Leben (für Brilka)* [2014], *Die Katze und der General* [2018], and most recently *Das mangelnde Licht* [2022]. Haratischwili also writes texts and directs for the theater – I discuss her contribution to a contemporary European play *Ein europäisches Abendmahl* in chapter four of this dissertation.

### **Against “Westsplaining”**

In an interview, Haratischwili claims the history of the twentieth century has predominantly been narrated through a Western perspective. She states “[a]lles, was in der Literatur, im Film passiert, ist aus westlicher Sicht” [Everything that happens in literature and film is from a western view].<sup>117</sup> Haratischwili thus offers an expansion of the scope of memory work in contemporary German literature in her novel. For, she introduces post-socialist memories from beyond the contemporary German border and an Eastern view on major

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<sup>116</sup> Petra Schellen, “Das Montags-Interview: ‘Eine spannende Odyssee,’” *Die Tageszeitung: taz*, October 25, 2009, <https://taz.de/!5153697/>.

<sup>117</sup> Tigran Petrosyan, “Eine patriarchale, gewalttätige Zeit,” *Die Tageszeitung: taz*, February 25, 2023, <https://taz.de/!5915231/>. Translation my own.

historical events into her own contribution of a German *Vergangenheitsbearbeitung* while also complicating the big East-West dichotomy.<sup>118</sup>

In an account of the Prague Spring, for example, Haratschwili's narrator Niza recounts how her great aunt Kitty decided to sing an old Georgian folksong in the midst of the protest and Niza reflects on its later reception:

In der kollektiven Erinnerung des Westens, Brilka, wird der »Prager Frühling« als eine der größten und mutigsten Revolten gegen die sowjetische Tyrannei gefeiert. Für den Osten war es ein Klagelied, ein trauriger Moment, weil der Vorhang, der sich gerade einen kleinen Spalt geöffnet hatte, gleich nur noch fester zugezogen wurde. (AL 626)

In the collective memory of the West, Brilka, the 'Prague Spring' is celebrated as one of the biggest and most courageous revolts against the Soviet tyranny. For the East, it was a threnody, a moment of sadness, because the curtain that had just been pushed ever so slightly aside would soon be drawn even more firmly closed. (EL 456)

Haratschwili relates the post-socialist memory of the historical event through the insertion of the fictional familial memory. Kitty's folksong becomes the lament for the East and serves as a contact point between the familial memory and the wider collective memory. Haratschwili highlights the Eastern European perspective of the Prague Spring by contrasting its reception with the one across the Iron curtain. Through this fictional character's action in the constructed narrative as part of actual historical events, she highlights the constructed feature of collective memory, including different perspectives between East and West.

Haratschwili plays with the framing of Kitty as a real historical figure who is part of European collective memory. For most of the narrative, Haratschwili uses quotes from real

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<sup>118</sup> As Friederike Eigler suggests, I prefer the term *Vergangenheitsbearbeitung* to *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, since the latter implies a process that is closed off and completed whereas the former suggests a continuous process. Cf. Friederike Ursula Eigler, *Gedächtnis und Geschichte in Generationenromanen seit der Wende* (Berlin: E. Schmidt, 2005), 10 n. 4.

sources as mottos for sections: e.g., Anna Akhmatova (Russian poet), Alla Pugacheva (Russian/Soviet singer), Galaktion Tabidze (Georgian poet), Anton Chekov, Soviet hymns, Leon Trotsky, Edward Bernstein, Nikita Krushchev, Lenin, Mao, Depeche Mode, and Bob Dylan. However, she inserts one of Kitty's English lyrics as a motto (AL 891; EL 656) despite its fictional status outside the diegetic world of the novel. Yet, while Kitty is fictional, what Kitty represents – an Eastern perspective – is entirely real.

In several interviews, Haratischwili has commented on the disproportionate value placed on Eastern perspectives in favour of a Western one. In terms of history, she admits her own knowledge reflects this dynamic, even as someone who grew up in Eastern Europe:

Ich hab dann irgendwann mit Schrecken festgestellt, dass mein Wissen über das zwanzigste Jahrhundert geschichtlich vor allem aus deutscher oder westlicher Perspektive geprägt ist. [...] ich [wusste] sehr sehr viel mehr über irgendwie Nationalsozialismus als über den Kommunismus.

At some point I then realized that my historical knowledge of the twentieth century was informed by the German or Western perspective. [...] I knew much much more about like National Socialism than about Communism.<sup>119</sup>

This surprising imbalance could be attributed to the fact that the author attended a high school where the teachers were predominantly native German speakers. Yet, she elaborates in a second interview that “[a]lles, was in der Literatur, im Film passiert, ist aus westlicher Sicht” [Everything that happens in literature, in film is made from a western perspective].<sup>120</sup> Certainly, a greater amount of time has passed from the end of National Socialism that has allowed for more processing and “working through” what happened than is the case with state socialism.

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<sup>119</sup> “Zeit Des Exils: Interview mit Nino Haratischwili”, uploaded by Körber-Stiftung (*YouTube*, 2021), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6puk5be12yQ>.

<sup>120</sup> Petrosyan, “Georgische Autorin über Sowjetunion.”



Yet, several voices from the East have complained that the West also seeks to explain the East's own past from the former's point of view – particularly in the wake of the Russian attack on Ukraine. Haratischwili refers specifically to Szczepan Twardoch, a well-known Polish author, who calls for this “westsplaining” to end.<sup>121</sup> “Westsplaining” – a neologism from “West” and “explaining” – pejoratively criticizes Western points of view that seek to *explain* Eastern European relations with disregard to what people from the region say themselves. The term itself is not new, however it has become increasingly popular since the Russian-Ukrainian war. Previously, “westsplaining” was used, for example, in the context of the West's response to Yugoslavia and the predominantly Anglo-American analysis of its disintegration.<sup>122</sup>

Haratischwili's *Das achte Leben (für Brilka)* serves, I argue, as a response to a Western viewpoint on history. The author's criticism of the West is also apparent in the novel, where Niza writes: “Es lag nahe, dass der Westen mit seinem voreingenommenen Blick stets den Fehler wiederholte, den Osten falsch einzuschätzen [AL 626; The West, with its prejudiced viewpoint, was always misinterpreting the East, EL 456]. The novel provides a fictional portrayal of an Eastern European family's experience of the twentieth century and how it lived through key events that define European history, such as the Second World War. Through this family, the novel looks at the history of state socialism through the intertwining of the fictional and non-fictional, educating the reader on key events of socialism and its legacy in post-Soviet Georgia (e.g., the Bolshevik revolution, Katyn massacre, Rose revolution).

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<sup>121</sup> Szczepan Twardoch, “Liebe westeuropäische Intellektuelle: Ihr habt keine Ahnung von Russland,” *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, April 6, 2022, <https://www.nzz.ch/feuilleton/ukraine-krieg-schluss-mit-westsplaining-ld.1676881>.

<sup>122</sup> E.g., Vladimir Kulić and Bojana Videkanić, “Thick Descriptions: Socialist Yugoslavia in Construction,” *Histories of Postwar Architecture*, no. 6 (October 29, 2020): 4, <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2611-0075/11612>.

## Familial & Socio-Political Memory

In addition to an Eastern counternarrative, Haratischwili offers a much richer account of interwoven plural histories through her character-driven plot. Unlike Herta Müller, however, who similarly offers a voice from Eastern Europe, Haratischwili states that she aims for her readers to identify with her characters. Drawing a comparison with the news media, she asserts that literature “schafft [...] ein empathisches Bild, das größere Brücken schlägt” [creates an empathetic image, that builds bigger bridges], due to the reader sticking with characters for a long period of time during the reading process.<sup>123</sup> The vast generational narrative that she creates spans over a thousand pages, telling of both socio-political and fictional familial memories. Through the novel, Haratischwili encourages the reader to engage with a specifically Georgian history of state socialism through this interplay of fictional and non-fictional memory.

As discussed above, Haratischwili insists on a “grand” East-West binary, however her work also introduces complications into this duality. She namely foregrounds a Georgian memory of state socialism while highlighting the intertwining of the country’s history with Russia’s own history. She creates nuances within post-socialist memory by detailing the Russian/Georgian antagonism and the respective varied standpoints, expounding multiple layers within Eastern European memory itself irrespective of the West.

At the opening of *Das achte Leben (für Brilka)*, the female narrator Niza Jaschi alludes to the complexity of different memories at play by problematizing the beginning of her text. Niza

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<sup>123</sup> Petrosyan, “Georgische Autorin über Sowjetunion.”

states that the story of their family's history, which spans six generations, has several beginnings and so she will begin with three at once:

Eigentlich hat diese Geschichte mehrere Anfänge. Ich kann mich schwer für einen entscheiden. Da sie alle *den Anfang* ergeben.

Man könnte diese Geschichte in einer Berliner Altbauwohnung beginnen – recht unspektakulär und mit zwei nackten Körpern im Bett. [...] Man kann die Geschichte aber auch mit einem zwölfjährigen Mädchen beginnen, das beschließt, der Welt, in der sie lebt, ein Nein ins Gesicht zu schleudern und einen anderen Anfang für sich und ihre Geschichte zu suchen.

Oder man kann ganz weit, zu den Wurzeln, zurückgehen und dort beginnen.

Oder man fängt die Geschichte mit allen drei Anfängen gleichzeitig an. (AL 9, emphasis in original)

This story actually has many beginnings. It's hard for me to choose one, because all of them constitute *the beginning*.

You could start this story in an old, high-ceilinged flat in Berlin, quite undramatically, with two naked bodies in bed. [...] But you could also start this story with a twelve-year old girl who decides to say NO! to the world in which she lives and set [sic] off in search of another beginning for herself, for her story.

Or you start the story with all the beginnings at once. (EL 1, emphasis in original)

All three beginnings suggested by Niza are framed by a particular family member: with the family's "roots" and Niza's unnamed great-great-grandfather "der Schokoladenfabrikant" [the chocolate maker] and his daughter Stasia, with Niza herself living in Berlin, and finally a beginning with her niece Brilka in a train – although it is remarkable that the English translation differs from the German original in that it omits the third "beginning" of the family's roots as seen in the above quote (EL 1). This omission elides the long perspective that Haratischwili draws out on the far-reaching history of state socialism and the intricacies of Russian-Georgian relations. However, in removing this perhaps "traditional" beginning – traditional in terms of its affordance of a chronological narration of the family's story –, the translators emphasize the present's ability to inflect memory and give meaning to past events.

In narrating these “beginnings,” Niza does not notably initially refer to the vastly different socio-political circumstances under which each family member lived: Stasia was born at the turn of the twentieth century and her story unfolds during the transition from Tsarist to Bolshevik rule Georgia (e.g., AL 67; EL 42); Niza’s strand covers the 9<sup>th</sup> April demonstrations in Tbilisi (e.g., AL 1036; EL 760), the period of transition from the end of Soviet Union to Georgian independence and her life in unified Germany; Brilka’s story takes place during the pro-Western foreign policy following the Rose Revolution in 2003 and the anti-government 2007 demonstrations in Tbilisi. This context is eventually mentioned in the prologue to contextualize the narrative.<sup>124</sup> Later in book one, the antagonistic relationship between what is today the respective separate states of Russia and Georgia is indicated between the different political stances between Niza’s pro-Russian great-great-grandfather and his second wife who saw Russia as “den Ursprung allen Übels” [AL 50; the origin of all evil, EL 30]. This framing is used to educate the reader on Georgian history to set up the external forces that affect the family’s history.

The triptych of beginnings to the text also attempts to break away from a linear concept of the (hi)story. The multidirectional narrative creates resonances between the various strands of the family history and discloses that memory is not a closed-off entity that can be neatly transmitted, but that it is inherently open to new access points and potential changes in the future. It shows how later events can inflect earlier ones – since the beginning of the family’s story could be

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<sup>124</sup> Niza writes: “Ein Land, das im letzten Jahrhundert nach 135 Jahren zaristischer und russischer Schirmherrschaft es genau vier Jahre lang schaffte, eine Demokratie zu errichten, bis sie dann schließlich erneut von den größtenteils russischen, aber auch georgischen Bolschewiken gestürzt und als Sozialistische Republik Georgien und somit als eine Teilrepublik der Sowjetunion proklamiert wurde. // In dieser *Union* blieb das Land für die nächsten siebenzig Jahre” [AL 19; The country that, in the last century, after a hundred and thirty-five years of tsarist Russian patronage, managed to establish a democracy for precisely four years before it was toppled again by the mostly Russian but also Georgian Bolsheviks, and proclaimed the Socialist Republic of Georgia and thus a constituent of the Soviet Union. // The country that then remained in this *union* for the next seventy years, EL 8].

Brilka's strand as Niza suggests. Or, as I argue in this chapter, in the context of migration it reveals how earlier events from a different context can be subsumed into, expand, and inflect the German memory archive as a new component of it.

## **A Generational Narrative**

The outlined complications of temporality notwithstanding, *Das achte Leben (für Brilka)* is principally narrated chronologically from generation to generation. The long generational narrative affords a large scope and zoomed out view that reveals the long history of communism on the European continent while explaining the young Brilka's familial legacy to her. Similarly, this long perspective reveals the complexity of Georgian history and its entanglement with Russian and communist history over the course of the twentieth century. For example, after announcing the year 1917 was the year of love for Stasia, her great-grandmother, Niza directly tells of a significant event of Bolshevik history that took place ten years prior: "Ein Raubüberfall, der sich an einem warmen Junitag auf dem schönen Jeriwanski- (und später Lenin- und noch später Freiheits-) Platz in Tbilissi ereignet hatte" [AL 67; A robbery that took place on a warm June day, In Tbilisi's pretty Yerevan Square (later Lenin, and even later Freedom, Square), EL 42]. The three names of this one square pre-emptively warns of the turbulent history in Tbilisi and yet it is framed by the grandmother's love – perhaps also anticipating the turbulent familial lives of the Jaschi family.

The narrative flashes back to ten years prior to narrate the robbery, disrupting the chronology and interrupting the family's story with a socio-political event. In this way, Haratischwili leaves a gap in the novel's narrative, something that Niza highlights as a difficulty

in her narration: “Brilka, manchmal habe ich das Gefühl, dass mir beim Erzählen die Luft wegbleibt, dann muss ich innehalten, ans Fenster treten und tief Luft holen. [...] Es ist vielmehr wegen der Leerstellen” [AL 521; Telling this story, Brilka, I sometimes feel as if I can’t breathe. Then I have to stop, go over to the window, and take a deep breath. [...] It’s because of the blanks, EL 378]. When the focalization changes between characters, for example, within the eight books, the narrative jumps and parts of the story are left untold from a particular character’s perspective. These narrative gaps function differently to the gaps between Herta Müller’s montage that I examined in Chapter One since they are not evidence of a particular gaze, but rather of the intricacy and complexity of collective memories. However, they do serve a similar purpose to those in Müller’s work since the gaps in Haratschwili’s novel also resist a teleological linearity that understands the novel’s events as neatly following on from one consequence to the next to some ultimate goal.

In contrast to teleological linearity, Haratschwili emphasizes the intertwinement and synchronicity of familial and socio-political memories without uniting them into one unfolding narrative. Haratschwili’s narrator, Niza, describes her own account of the Jaschi family’s memory with the image of a “Wollknäuel” that she attempts to pull apart since it contains so many familial and socio-political stories: “Ich versuche, dieses Wollknäuel auseinanderzuziehen, weil man ja die Dinge nacheinander erzählen muss, weil die Gleichzeitigkeit der Welt nicht in Worte zu fassen ist” [AL 521; I’m trying to untangle this skein of wool because you have to tell things one after another, because you can’t put the simultaneity of the world into words, EL 378]. The tangled wool skein of “things” comprises layers or threads that brings fictional individual, familial, and real socio-political memories into contact with one another

multidirectionally, creating a new “Wollknäuel” that nevertheless retains the gaps of other untold potential stories.

Friederike Eigler identifies this palimpsestuous multiplicity as a narrative tendency of *Generationenromane* published between 1989 and 2003 and describes this dynamic as existing somewhere between the conflicting poles of fictionality and referentiality [“im Spannungsfeld zwischen Fiktionalität und Referenzialität”].<sup>125</sup> This leads Eigler to read the genre as contributing to the collective memory of a reunified Germany. She examines several examples of *Generationenromane* in terms of how they comment on and contribute to dealing with [Bearbeitung] the National Socialist past, the 1968 West German protest movement, and GDR socialism. As a literary scholar, Eigler has a clear focus on German literature and its contribution to memory, and thus approaches it from a German and by extension Western perspective – although she does acknowledge GDR socialism as significant.

## Great Women of (Hi)Story

Haratschwili’s narrator, Niza, explicitly reflects on what events end up becoming part of “history” or collective memory and asks “was wohl wäre, wenn das kollektive Gedächtnis der Welt andere Dinge erhalten und wiederum andere verloren hätte” [AL 521f.; What would happen if the world’s collective memory had retained different things and lost others, EL 378]. These lost memories not only concern the post-socialist perspective, but also often the familial or

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<sup>125</sup> Eigler, *Gedächtnis und Geschichte in Generationenromanen seit der Wende*, 10.

everyday memory which Haratischwili's novel also addresses. As the story predominantly takes place in the family's native Georgia, Niza accordingly refers, or rather alludes, to the ways that political occurrences and the Cold War affect the family in a manner that frequently hides the explicitly political. While there are sufficient references to war and political events in the novel — such as the Russian Revolution, the Red Army invasion of Georgia, and the rise of the Nazi party in Germany — Niza consistently reports them in relation to familial ones: “So waren im Jahr der Liebe meiner Urgroßmutter die Romanows nach 300 Jahren Herrschaft durch die Arbeiter- und Soldatenräte und eine provisorische Übergangsregierung ersetzt worden” [AL 67; Thus, in the year of my great-grandmother's love, the Romanovs were replaced, after three hundred years of rule, by the workers' and soldiers' councils and a provisional government, EL 42]. Similarly, large political figures of the Soviet Union, who sometimes appear in the text as characters themselves and interact with family members take a back seat and are not named until the very end of the novel. For example, Vladimir Lenin is referred to as “Genosse Uljanow” [Comrade Ulyanov] and Josef Stalin is described as “der Anführer dieser Räuberbande ist ein georgischer Schustersohn [...], noch heißt er nicht der *stählerne Mann*” [AL 68, emphasis in original; The leader of this band of robbers is a Georgian cobbler's son [...] he is not yet called the *man of steel*, EL 43]. Lavrentiy Beria, director of the Soviet secret police, is the most significant historical figure to feature in the text. Only referred to as “der Kleine Große Mann” [e.g., AL 166; the Little Big man, EL 116], he interacts most directly with the fictional Jaschi family, significantly engaging in an affair with Niza's great-aunt Christine.

While referring or alluding to major historical figures and events of the 20th century, the narrator places great emphasis on significant events in the lives of her forebears. While Beria, for example, interacts with the family, the focus of the story lies with the consequences for Christine



– namely her husband discovers her affair with Beria and mutilates her face since it was her beauty that supposedly attracted Beria. The focus specifically pertains to the female members and their stories of migration with the notable exception of Niza’s grandfather Kostja, whose story also becomes a focal point. The attention given to gendered dynamics and the female experience is alluded to in the prologue to the eight books, as Niza describes Georgia as “[d]as Land, in dessen Sprache es kein Geschlecht gibt (keineswegs gleichzusetzen mit Gleichberechtigung) [AL 19; The country in whose language there is no gender (which certainly does not equate to equal rights, EL 8]. The parenthetical remark alerts the reader to this inequality, and signals that the female experience will be a subject of Niza’s narration for her niece.

The Jaschi family’s history is transferred in this text through the female members of the family, namely through the great-grandmother Stasia whose stories Niza records. One of the first stories Niza relates is about the family’s woven rug [*Teppich*] that Stasia gave to her. Stasia told the young Niza that she wanted to restore the rug, explaining to her great-granddaughter that there are many stories in the rug:

Ein Teppich ist eine Geschichte. In ihr verbergen sich wiederum unzählige andere Geschichten [...] Das sind einzelne Fäden. Der einzelne Faden ist wiederum auch eine einzelne Geschichte, verstehst du mich? [...] Du bist ein Faden, ich bin ein Faden, zusammen ergeben wir eine kleine Verzierung, mit vielen anderen Fäden zusammen ergeben wir ein Muster. [...] Teppiche sind aus Geschichten gewoben. Also muss man sie wahren und pflegen. Auch wenn dieser jahrelang irgendwo verpackt den Motten zum Fraß vorgeworfen wurde, muss er nun aufleben und uns seine Geschichten erzählen. (AL 30f.)

A carpet is a story. And hidden within it are countless other stories. [...] Those are individual threads. And each individual thread is an individual story. Do you understand what I’m saying? [...] You’re a thread, I’m a thread; together we make a little ornamentation, and together with lots of other threads we make a pattern. [...] Carpets are woven from stories. (EL 15f.)

The reference to storytelling in relation to the family's woven carpet as a receptacle for the stories relates to the separate image of the skein of wool discussed above. The carpet is, however, a more complex image that emphasizes the multiple strands in a narrative: It is the "Wollknäuel" unfolded into form. Both the carpet and the skein of wool immediately recall the common classical trope of the weaving woman (e.g., Homer's Penelope or Ovid's Philomela).<sup>126</sup> The emphasis on the women and their stories, however, adapts the classical model whereby they become the active storytellers who do not need to resort to telling their stories silently through their weaving. Instead, their personal histories become part of a counter-discourse against the "great men" of history. Indeed, it is the fictional characters that have names whereas Haratschwili by and large does not name the historical figures. The women, particularly Brilka, Kitty, and the narrator Niza, depart on their own odyssey throughout Europe, traveling not only physically, but also symbolically into the collective memory of reunified Germany as a counterpoint to the "great men."

In her storytelling, Niza rubs against the novel's chronology and inserts her present time synchronously into the narrative of past events, reminding the reader that this counter-history is not linear. In between her account of her mother's birth, she describes the present as being "zu present, zu aufdringlich, ich kann dabei nicht der Vergangenheit zuhören" [AL 523; too alive, too intrusive, and I can't listen to the past, EL 370]. Felix Lempp reads this dynamic in *Das achte Leben* under a paradigm of a "Bruch[...]" Lempp sees such a "break" not only in the novel's structure and content, but in Niza and Brilka as they both take on a double role in the

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<sup>126</sup> In Homer's epic *Odyssey*, Penelope awaits her husband Odysseus as he returns from Troy on a journey that takes twenty years. She announces that she will only choose a suitor once she has finished weaving the burial shroud for Odysseus's father Laertes. However, she undoes her weaving at night to delay choosing a suitor from the men who gathered in Odysseus's absence. Ovid tells of Philomela in book six of his epic *Metamorphoses*, who was raped by her sister's husband Tereus. To ensure her silence, Tereus cut out Philomela's tongue and so, unable to speak, she weaves a tapestry to tell her sister Procne of Tereus's actions.

narrative. Niza functions as the narrative voice [*Erzählinstanz*] and becomes a character of her own narration, referring to herself in the third person. Brilka, on the other hand, acts as the addressee of Niza's storytelling and is similarly a figure in the narrative.<sup>127</sup>

Reading Niza in terms of duality is productive for looking at the way memory works in Haratschwili's novel. To differentiate between Niza's roles, the author utilizes the present tense for Niza as narrator [*Erzählzeit*] and the preterit when she becomes the protagonist of her own narrative [*erzählte Zeit*]. The insistence on the time of Niza's narration as "too alive" reminds the audience of the trajectory of this story that she is telling, namely that she and her niece are navigating the German landscape and creating resonances between their familial, post-socialist memories with the German collective memory, thereby adding to its *Nationalgeschichte*.

Similar to the lack of linearity in terms of the novel's content, *Das achte Leben* does not only present the transgenerational transfer of memory as a linear interaction between an older generation and a younger one. Instead, it breaks through this order to reveal how the transfer of memory between family members is one of mutual interaction whereby each actor contributes actively to the present production of memory. This future-oriented logic enables later memories to resonate with earlier ones in a way that interweaves them *multidirectionally*, which not only pertains to the familial but also to collective memory. Haratschwili uses several images of entanglement throughout her novel to emphasize this multidirectional structure of memory. Although the novel is generally narrated chronologically in terms of generations from Tsarist Russia to the demise of the Soviet Union, the prologue emphasizes an intertwining of stories and introduces such entangled images to highlight the ways that memory can work in a

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<sup>127</sup> Felix Lempp, "'Teppiche sind aus Geschichten gewoben.' Problematisierungen generationalen Erzählens in Nino Haratschwili's *Das achte Leben* (Für Brilka) und Jette Steckels Inszenierung am Thalia Theater Hamburg," *Convivium. Germanistisches Jahrbuch Polen*, December 30, 2020, 95, <https://doi.org/10.18778/2196-8403.2020.05>.

multidirectional network. Already in the prologue's title "Prolog oder Die Partitur des Vergessens" [Prologue or the Score of Forgetting], the reader is presented with a polychronous image — a musical score that conjures up the idea of numerous elements functioning together simultaneously and relating to one another in various ways, just as the three beginnings in the prologue are narrated. Niza later describes the way these stories work:

[d]iese Geschichten, die ständig parallel verlaufen, chaotisch; die in den Vordergrund treten, sich verstecken und sich gegenseitig ins Wort fallen. Denn sie verknüpfen und durchbrechen sich, sie umgehen, sie überschneiden und bespitzeln sich gegenseitig, sie verraten und führen in die Irre, sie legen Spuren, verwischen sie, und vor allem bergen sie in sich noch Abertausende von anderen Geschichten. (AL 31)

These stories that constantly run in parallel, chaotically; that appear in the foreground, conceal themselves, interrupt one another. Because they connect and break through each other, they betray and mislead, they lay tracks, cover them up, and most of all they contain within them hundreds of thousands of other stories. (EL 16)

Niza's description of the multitude and confusion of stories and how each story contains "noch Abertausende" of other stories within them reflects memory's openness and highlights that it is never entirely bounded with strict borders. For example, the Holocaust survivor Fred's story (AL 484 f.; EL 350f.) becomes part of the familial memory enacted in Niza's retelling to Brilka. Fred's story of persecution as a child runs "in parallel" so-to-speak and resonates with Niza's great aunt Kitty's own traumatic memory. Haratischwili's novel thus shows on the micro level of one family unit how different memories run parallelly and resonate with one another, or even how memories that do not initially belong to a given collective memory are able to belong as a new component, e.g., due to migration.

## Holocaust Memory

The Holocaust and the Second World War are mentioned numerous times throughout the novel, and not only through a Jewish victim's point of view. The complexity in Eastern Europe is made apparent since Haratischwili's novel gives expression to aspects of this prominent memory that are not frequently narrated. Specifically, Kitty's boyfriend Andro becomes involved with the Georgian Legion, a branch of the Wehrmacht (1941-1945), that consisted of ethnic Georgian emigrants, prisoners of war, and deserters from the Red Army. Their aim was an independent Georgia no longer under the yoke of the Soviet Union, but rather to establish Georgia's existence as an autonomous state under the Greater German Reich (*Großdeutsches Reich*). In the novel, Andro is approached by a stranger who claims "Die Deutschen strebten für Georgien die Freiheit an [AL 277; EL The Germans are striving for freedom for Georgia, EL 197]. He eventually decides to join the exiles of the Georgian Legion fighting along Nazi Germany and leaves for the Crimean Peninsula, since the stranger reveals to Andro that his mother was murdered by actors of the Soviet Union. This "thread" of the Jaschi family's story begins to reveal the intricate political situation in the region whereby Georgia – as with other Eastern European countries – experienced occupation and oppression from the Soviet Union and initially embraced support from Fascist Germany.

Niza also tells Brilka of the entangled memory of Soviet state socialism and German fascism in her narration of the Katyn massacre (AL 249f.; EL 176f.). Only naming Stalin as the "Generalissimus", Niza narrates how he received a letter from the "Kleinen Großen Mannes" [Little Big Man], i.e., Lavrentiy Beria, to shoot 25,700 Polish prisoners, and subsequently that Roman Rudenko (Procurator-General of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic) accused the

Nazis of carrying out the execution at the Nuremberg trials in 1946. While Andro's story tells of the conflicted motivations people may have felt during the Second World War in Soviet Georgia, the Katyn massacre tells of the misuse of memory by the Soviet Union.

*Das achte Leben* emphasizes the interrelatedness of memories that are typically seen as "German" and those that have "travelled" such as post-socialist memory, as I claim, into the German *Nationalgeschichte*. A particularly productive example of the entanglement of memories – and entirely different from the above examples – is the relationship between Niza's great aunt Kitty and the Austrian Jewish woman Fred Liebllich that develops after Kitty's emigration over the Cold War divide to Western Europe. Fred, a survivor of the Holocaust, relates her own memories of the camps Theresienstadt and Mauthausen during the Second World War (AL 484 - 491; EL 350 – 355) and Kitty later tells of her own experience of persecution at the hands of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD), the Soviet interior ministry (AL 563f.; EL 411). In London, Fred notices that Kitty understands German and senses her traumatic past, prompting her to narrate her own:

Ich erinnere mich noch so genau, wie es anfang. Wie es mit diesen kranken Judensternen begann. Mit dem Arbeitsverbot meines Vaters. Mit den Angstattacken meiner Mutter [...] Ich erinnere mich noch sehr genau, wie es war, als sie kamen. Die ganze schwarze Aufmachung. Das Getue mit den Gewehren. Der schneidige Ton. Als benutzten sie eine andere Sprache, nicht meine Muttersprache (AL 484 f.)

I still remember exactly how it began. How it started, with that nauseating Jewish star. With my father being barred from his job. With my mother's panic attacks [...] I still remember very clearly what it was like when they came. Dressed all in black. Posturing with their guns. The sharp tone of voice. As if they were speaking a different language, not my mother tongue (EL 350f.)

As Fred touches the scar indicating the wound Kitty received at the hands of the NKVD, Fred begins to tell her story. The scar as bodily reminder of Kitty's maltreatment functions as a

“touching point” for Fred to remember and express her experience of the Holocaust. The repetition of “I remember” contrasts with Kitty’s silence on her own history that she has refused to discuss since leaving Georgia. Only at a later point in time does she tell Fred her own traumatic story, however the dialogue is not part of the narrative and is summarized in one sentence.<sup>128</sup> Fred’s memory, on the other hand, is recounted over six pages (AL 484-490; EL 350-354). And, as Niza is narrator, writing down memories for Brilka, Fred’s story and the memory of the Holocaust enters the family’s own memory archive through the resonances felt between Fred and Kitty in their respective histories of violence. Their conversations about their traumatic pasts are a particularly notable point in the novel where two memories touch multidirectionally, which is later emphasized when Brilka as a descendent of Kitty is found precisely in Mödling, the small village outside Vienna to where Fred escaped from Mauthausen (cf. AL 14, 490; EL 5, 354).

### **An Expanded History**

Collective memory in the German (and European) context is closely tied to the Holocaust since rejection of the National Socialist past serves as a foundation for German identity in the postwar period through to reunification. Some scholars, such as political scientist Claus Leggewie and historian Dan Diner, suggest that the Holocaust therefore constitutes a negative foundational myth in European collective memory.<sup>129</sup> The Cold War divide and Stalinist crimes

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<sup>128</sup> “Und sie erzählte in einem nahezu sachlichen Ton in knappen Sätzen von ihrem alten Leben, das zu dem Klassenzimmer und der Blonden und Mariam geführt hatte.” [AL 564; And Kitty told her, in an almost matter-of-fact tone, about her old life, the life that had led to the classroom and the blonde woman and Mariam, EL 411].

<sup>129</sup> Claus Leggewie, “Die Grenzen Der Nationalkultur,” in *Transit Deutschland - Debatten zu Nation und Migration: Eine Dokumentation*, ed. Deniz Göktürk et al. (Munich: Konstanz University Press, 2011), 749. Dan Diner,

are recognized and form what Aleida Assmann names as one of the key events [*Kernereignis*] of European memory, while World War Two and the Holocaust — the other key event — have received significantly more attention in scholarship and (Western) European memory culture until recently.<sup>130</sup>

Through Kitty and Fred's interactions, Haratschwili creates a resonance between these two "key events" and situates them both as discourses pertinent to a German *Vergangenheitsbearbeitung*. The multidirectional exchanges are inherently futural since they have the potential to expand the current *Nationalgeschichte* and thus the collective memory archive. The incorporation of Brilka, and as such the youngest member of the Jaschi family, as one of the three potential openings to the family's story signals this awareness of the potential relevance of individual memory for the future and suggests that each person is to a certain extent a "new" beginning – demonstrated most explicitly in the blank page left for Brilka at the end of the novel.

However, the beginning with the figure of Brilka not only discloses potential new ways to view the family's own past in relation to its present (and future). It also puts the familial events into the broader context of post-1989 Europe, since the teenager is introduced in the prologue as looking at "das *alte, neue* Europa" [AL 11; old, new Europe, EL 2] from a train window.<sup>131</sup> The youngest member of this Georgian family sets off as she seeks a connection to Europe because of her great aunt Kitty's migration there. She moves through a narrative of

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"Restitution and Memory: The Holocaust in European Political Cultures," *New German Critique*, no. 90 (2003): 36–44, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3211106>. See also Blacker and Etkind, "Introduction."

<sup>130</sup> Assmann, *Das neue Unbehagen an der Erinnerungskultur*, 155. See also Blacker and Etkind, "Introduction."

<sup>131</sup> Emphasis in original German but absent in the English translation.



family history and into the sociopolitical space of Europe, into the post-1989 constellation of theoretical European unity.

While this reference to Europe may not initially seem significant, the antonymic adjectives “old and new” reveal in a nutshell the futural perspective apparent in Haratischwili’s novel as they highlight the multidirectionality of memory at play. Europe can be seen as both “old and new” at the same time in its present and future. Similarly, the content of the novel relates scenes of familial memory multidirectionally to wider European events, whereby both familial and socio-political events are always present at the same time. Brilka’s traveling thus serves as an allegory for how this family’s memory of events beyond Germany itself is traveling into German national history through her act and for how their lived experiences can become part of the “new” memory landscape.

## Chapter 3: Unlimited Memory: Saša Stanišić's Open-Ended

### Origins

#### Stanišić vs. Handke

In his acceptance speech for the 2019 *Deutscher Buchpreis* (German Book Prize), Bosnian-German author Saša Stanišić addressed the controversial bestowal of the Nobel Prize in literature on Austrian author Peter Handke in 2019, an event that he said “spoiled” the former’s own happiness for his own award.<sup>132</sup> In his debut novel *Wie der Soldat das Grammophon repariert*, Stanišić directly names the postwar author and alludes to the controversy surrounding him: “višegrad genozid handke scham verantwortung” [S 215; višegrad genocide *handke* shame responsibility, SG 236].<sup>133</sup> As a vocal critic of Handke, Stanišić reprehends the former’s stance on the Yugoslav wars and his unbridled support of war criminal and president of Serbia Slobodan Milošević.

Handke’s interest with the former Yugoslavia began long before the Nobel win with his essay titled “Abschied des Träumers vom Neunten Land” [1991, The Dreamer’s Farewell to the Ninth Country] which is typically seen by literary critics as the beginnings of his literary engagement with the region and its violent disintegration.<sup>134</sup> The essay was the first of several

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<sup>132</sup> Stanišić, Saša, “Deutscher Buchpreis 2019 | Dankesrede des Preisträgers Saša Stanišić,” YouTube, October 14, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m86N9AHF4hY>.

<sup>133</sup> Saša Stanišić, *Wie der Soldat das Grammophon repariert: Roman* (München: btb, 2008). Citations from the text will be indicated in parentheses with the abbreviation S and the corresponding page number. Stanišić, Saša, *How the Soldier Repairs the Gramophone*, trans. Bell, Anthea (New York: Grove Press, 2008). Citations of the translation will be indicated with the abbreviation SG and the corresponding page number.

<sup>134</sup> First published in a shortened form in the *Süddeutschen Zeitung* in 1991. Peter Handke, *Abschied des Träumers vom neunten Land: Eine Wirklichkeit, Die Vergangen ist, Erinnerung an Slowenien* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991).

controversies related to what critics saw as Handke's downplaying of Serbia's role in the Yugoslav wars.<sup>135</sup> As is the case with his work at large, Handke appears concerned with nuanced depictions of a given reality, criticizing the Western media's representation and commentary of the conflicts. While he reproaches American, French, German and British media for its biased coverage, the lack of nuance in his own "Yugoslav" texts is certainly striking and is itself taken to task. For example, the unbridled attention Handke affords Serbian suffering without remark of violence experienced by the Bosniak population has been criticized.<sup>136</sup> Stanišić himself reproaches Handke for the same reason, namely that the Austrian makes no mention of the crimes committed by Serbian military, which contrasts with Stanišić's own lived experience of the ethnic conflict: "Weil ich das Glück hatte dem zu entkommen was Peter Handke in seinen Texten nicht beschreibt" [Because I was fortunate to escape what Peter Handke does not describe in his texts].<sup>137</sup>

Indeed, Handke's blind-sighted support of Serbia and disregard of Serbian war crimes is documented in a claim he made on Serbian national television as reported by the *Spiegel*:

Was die Serben seit fünf, mehr noch, seit acht Jahren durchmachen, das hat kein Volk in diesem Jahrhundert in Europa durchgemacht. Dafür gibt es keine Kategorien. Bei

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<sup>135</sup> In 2006, for example, the controversy was reignited on the occasion of the Heinrich Heine prize, since the city of Düsseldorf had awarded it to Handke, leading to protests because of his political opinion about Serbia. One of the main points that led to the controversy was Handke's criticism of Western involvement in the conflict—e.g., NATO's bombing of the RTS television studios in Belgrade during the 1998-1999 Kosovo war which he depicts in *Die Geschichte des Dragoljub Milanović* (2011). The status of the legitimacy and whether the bombings constitute a war crime is debated. NGO Amnesty International considers this NATO attack as a war crime, since it states it was an attack on a civilian object. Cf. Amnesty International, "No Justice for the Victims of NATO Bombings," *Amnesty.Org* (blog), April 23, 2009, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2009/04/no-justicia-victimas-bombardeos-otan-20090423/>.

<sup>136</sup> E.g., Aleksandar Hemon, "Opinion | 'The Bob Dylan of Genocide Apologists,'" *The New York Times*, October 15, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/15/opinion/peter-handke-nobel-bosnia-genocide.html>.

<sup>137</sup> Stanišić, Saša, "Deutscher Buchpreis 2019 | Dankesrede des Preisträgers Saša Stanišić." Translation my own.

den Juden, da gibt es Kategorien, Begriffe - man kann darüber sprechen. Aber bei den Serben - das ist eine Tragödie ohne Grund. Das ist ein Skandal.

What the Serbs have been going through for five, no more, for eight years, no people have gone through such a thing in this century in Europe. There are no categories for it. In the case of the Jews, there are categories there, concepts – one can speak about it. But in the case of the Serbs – this is a tragedy without reason. This is a scandal.<sup>138</sup>

In a later op-ed for the French newspaper *Libération*, Handke summarizes his statement more pointedly as “les Serbes sont encore plus victimes que les juifs...” [the Serbs are even greater victims than the Jews...].<sup>139</sup> Handke does acknowledge that he cannot believe he expressed himself in this way, describing what he said on camera as “une telle idiotie” [such a stupid thing]. Yet, it is worth examining the workings of memory at play in his statements.

Handke alludes to the genocide of European Jewry during the Second World War with the phrase “bei den Juden.” He also refers to the following memory work that took place in his claim there are “Kategorien, Begriffe” to talk about the Holocaust, that one can “darüber sprechen.” However, it worth noting that in much Holocaust testimony and research on victims there is a strong emphasis on the inability to speak, namely that the events were ineffable.<sup>140</sup> Perhaps, Handke is, therefore, alluding to the later general discourse surrounding the Holocaust

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<sup>138</sup> Nataly Bleuel, “Peter Handke: Mars attacks!,” *Der Spiegel*, April 1, 1999, sec. Kultur, <https://www.spiegel.de/kultur/literatur/peter-handke-mars-attacks-a-15537.html>.

<sup>139</sup> Peter Handke, “Pardon de m’expliquer,” *Libération*, May 22, 2006, sec. Tribunes, [https://www.liberation.fr/tribune/2006/05/22/pardon-de-m-expliquer\\_40025/](https://www.liberation.fr/tribune/2006/05/22/pardon-de-m-expliquer_40025/). Translation my own. A summary of this *Libération* article was also translated into German and published in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*: Peter Handke, “Am Ende ist fast nichts mehr zu verstehen,” *Süddeutsche.de*, May 19, 2010, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/peter-handke-am-ende-ist-fast-nichts-mehr-zu-verstehen-1.879352>.

<sup>140</sup> See for example the conversation between Jorge Semprún and Elie Wiesel on their experiences in concentration camps during the Nazi period and the difficulty in speaking or writing about it: Wiesel says “Schweigen ist verboten, Sprechen ist unmöglich [Staying silent is forbidden, speaking is impossible]. The conversation took place in 1995. Jorge Semprún and Elie Wiesel, *Schweigen ist unmöglich*, trans. Wolfram Bayer, 2012 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2007), 18.

and the large amount of work that has been done to process and engage with it when he says one can talk about it. Or, he is centering his own perspective, namely one who did not experience it and who grew up in postwar Europe.

Handke's remarks are an example of how the Holocaust and the following *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, or rather *Vergangenheitsbearbeitung*,<sup>141</sup> are often invoked as a dominant paradigm of memory when seeking to address other histories of violence. For example, in post-apartheid South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings were set up in 1996 distinctly against the European model that arose after World War Two. The TRC was specifically adapted to distinguish itself from the Nuremberg and Eichmann trials, favoring a restorative model of justice as opposed to a retributive one as was the case in the latter.<sup>142</sup> More recently in the incredibly heated political climate, individuals or groups claim others to be “Nazis” in a way that divorces all historical context and meaning leading it to become an insult that signals someone is incredibly morally corrupt or “evil.” In some instances, this labeling is also co-opted to justify other acts of violence as in the case of the Russian assault on Ukraine where President Vladimir Putin named the leaders of the Ukrainian government as a “Nazis.”

In the case of Peter Handke, the author uses this analogy to bring light to the violence during the Yugoslav wars, particularly Serbian suffering. The comparison between the Holocaust and other histories of violence is certainly not new, but it is not often invoked in the case of other European histories of suffering – rather comparisons are most frequently removed temporally or

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<sup>141</sup> As mentioned in Chapter 2, I prefer the term *Vergangenheitsbearbeitung* as it does not imply that the process has ended.

<sup>142</sup> Cf. Andreas Huyssen on the role of Holocaust as a “motor energizing the discourses of memory elsewhere.” Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003), 99.

geographically i.e., in relation to Israel-Palestine conflict, apartheid in South Africa, or German colonial violence such as in Namibia.<sup>143</sup> Handke's statement thus struck a different nerve – particularly since Handke compares “the Jews” and “the Serbs.” The comparison made, however, is not made in good faith and evokes competition (“größere Opfer”), in the manner of Rothberg's “competitive model” of memory whereby different histories are drawn into a “zero-sum” struggle of hierarchical suffering.<sup>144</sup> In singling out the suffering of the Serbs and comparing it to that of the Jews during the Holocaust, Handke enters into the mental arithmetic of competitive memory, precluding meaningful engagement with a more inclusive memory culture that is open and able to acknowledge the intersections or entangled histories of violence – one that would be able to engage with Serbian and Bosnian suffering during the conflict without precluding one another.

Handke's claim that there are “categories” and “concepts” to talk about the suffering of the Jews but not the Serbs, insinuates moreover that being able to talk about, or the process of “dealing with,” has some relation to a group's status as victim. He does not appear to be saying that the Serbs suffering is worse or what they suffered is worse, but the fact of the lack of memory or reception of what happened makes them “bigger victims” – however this is certainly a generous reading of the controversial Nobel Laureate's statements.

Without defending Handke in any way, is there, and I speak provocatively here, an iota of truth in Handke's accusations? Is there a lack of awareness relating to the Yugoslavian conflict? With this provocative question, I do not wish to solely focus on Serbia as Handke does, but

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<sup>143</sup> Although as mentioned, Russian President Vladimir Putin invoked, and abused, the memory of the Holocaust in his justification of the attack on Ukraine, claiming the rise of National Socialism in the country and the need to “denazify” the former Soviet state.

<sup>144</sup> Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, 3.

would ask how is the disintegration of Yugoslavia received in Germany and Europe at large? To make clear, I am not claiming that one group or the other are bigger victims à la Handke since such a hierarchical comparison is neither productive nor acceptable. What I ask is whether a similar phenomenon is happening as was the case in the initial years after the Second World War where there existed a general lack of reception or awareness until much later, e.g., after the Holocaust mini-series was aired.<sup>145</sup> Are we thus becoming more aware of the Balkan wars in Europe in wake of the “Eastern Turn,”<sup>146</sup> and perhaps more aware of post-socialist memory at large?

In this chapter, I therefore analyze the entanglement of memories in the case of the former Yugoslavia and Germany in the works of contemporary author Saša Stanišić, reading how Stanišić also refers to Holocaust memory in his texts – however, unlike Handke, in a way that does not evoke competition. Through reading his prose texts, I examine how they destabilize a narrative of a “unified peaceful continent.” Stanišić’s texts, I argue, highlight that issues such as nationalism and ethnic cleansing still existed in post-1989 Europe and are even experiencing a forceful comeback in recent years. Through offering an “Eastern European” or post-socialist perspective, Stanišić’s texts pull back the curtain on the European Union’s “founding myth” of overcoming these problems, counteracting concrete teleological narratives in favor of complexity and open-endedness.

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<sup>145</sup> Of course, there was some immediate artistic reception of what had happened in the 1950s (e.g., Ilse Aichinger’s novel *Die größere Hoffnung* [1948] or Wolfgang Staudte’s film *Die Mörder sind unter uns* [1946]) but as a cultural collective memory the Holocaust was not received until much later.

<sup>146</sup> Haines, “The Eastern Turn in Contemporary German, Swiss and Austrian Literature.”

## Genre: An Autobiography?

A key figure of the “Eastern Turn,” Bosnian-German author Saša Stanišić was born in the former Yugoslavia in Višegrad (today in Bosnia). As outlined in the Introduction, Brigid Haines identified what she named an “Eastern Turn” in contemporary German literature. Haines sees a similar phenomenon to Leslie Adelson’s paradigmatic “Turkish Turn,” citing the increasing output of texts by authors from Eastern Europe in German. Considering Germany’s largest minority population, Adelson argues that migration has influenced the literary aesthetics and production in contemporary Germany. Focusing on countries beyond the former Iron Wall, Haines, on the other hand, highlights how Eastern Europe has been rediscovered as a literary topic and space.

Stanišić’s texts predominantly deal with Yugoslavia and its breakup – although not all texts since his prizewinning novel *Vor dem Fest* [Before the Feast, 2014] takes place in the Uckermark region of Germany.<sup>147</sup> The author fled as a teenager during the Bosnian war (1992-1995) to Germany with his family. Growing up in Heidelberg, Stanišić later studied Slavonic Studies and German as a Foreign Language (Deutsch als Fremdsprache). His debut novel *Wie der Soldat das Grammophon repariert* [How the Soldier Repairs the Gramophone] was published in 2006. Since his debut, Stanišić has won numerous prizes, including the *Preis der Leipziger Buchmesse* in 2014 for his second novel *Vor dem Fest* and the prestigious *Deutscher Buchpreis* in 2019 for his text *Herkunft* [Where You Come From, 2019]. More recently, Stanišić has turned

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<sup>147</sup> Saša Stanišić, *Vor Dem Fest: Roman* (München: Luchterhand, 2014). Stanišić’s short story collection *Fallensteller* also includes texts that do not take place or deal with Yugoslavia. Saša Stanišić, *Fallensteller: Erzählungen*, (München: btb, 2017).



to publishing children's literature: *Hey, hey, hey, Taxi!* [2021], *Panda-Pand* [2021], and *Wolf* [2023].

The question of narrative and perception in relation to a given reality plays a significant role in Stanišić's writings, particularly in his two autobiographically inflected ones *Wie der Soldat das Grammofon repariert* and *Herkunft* which I discuss in this chapter. Both texts deal with the memory of an immigrant protagonist who fled Bosnia for Germany during the Bosnian war.

In his debut novel *Wie der Soldat das Grammofon repariert*, Stanišić offers an Eastern European perspective on canonical German events. Narrated in the first person, the novel relates the experiences of its young protagonist Aleksandar Krsmanović during the Bosnian War (1992-1995) and the eventual dissolution of Yugoslavia. At the beginning, Aleksandar lives in the Bosnian town Višegrad, but flees at the age of fourteen with his family to Germany because of the onset of ethnic cleansing. After their migration, the novel continues predominantly in the form of Aleksandar's letters and transcripts of phone calls to Asija, a Muslim girl from Višegrad whom he seeks after she had disappeared during the war.

Stanišić further deals with the war in Bosnia in *Herkunft*.<sup>148</sup> This autobiographically inflected prose text traces the male narrator's recollections of his past in Bosnia and Germany. *Herkunft* explores the narrator's history in light of the ailing memory of his aging grandmother whose health is declining. Focalized through the perspective of the *Ich-Erzähler*, the text defies the generic norms of the novel and, like his earlier novel, takes the form of a narrative montage

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<sup>148</sup> Saša Stanišić, *Herkunft* (München: btb, 2020). Citations from the text will be indicated in parentheses with the abbreviation H and the corresponding page number. Saša Stanišić, *Where You Come From*, trans. Damion Searls (London: Jonathan Cape, 2021). Citations from the text will be indicated in parentheses with the abbreviation WYCF and the corresponding page number.

that resembles a collection of thoughts, memories, essayistic texts, and narrative of the protagonist's journey to his forefathers' village.

The protagonists are not synonymous with one another: Aleksandar Krsmanović is the child protagonist of *Wie der Soldat das Grammophon repariert* and the *Ich-Erzähler* of *Herkunft* is an adult named Saša Stanišić. Whereas the former is more clearly distanced from the author, the latter by virtue of sharing the same name as Stanišić blurs the distinction between author, narrator, and protagonist. The genre designations of these texts function in a similar manner. *Wie der Soldat das Grammophon repariert* is labeled a novel, and is thus stamped as a fictional tale, yet *Herkunft* is given no such genre marker. *Herkunft* has been described as an “autobiographical book” or “an autofictional novel” in reviews,<sup>149</sup> yet the text's open-ended form, montage, and essayistic reflections on memory and narratives of “origin” defy the typical characteristics of a novel.

In tracing what she calls the “waning of genre,” Lauren Berlant describes how “genres provide an affective expectation of the experience of watching something unfold, whether that thing is in life or art.”<sup>150</sup> Without the label of a given genre, the reader is given more autonomy to bring their own expectations to *Herkunft*. And as I shall discuss later, the text allows the reader to buy into the suggestions of being an autobiographical or autofictional novel. At the same time, the text consistently subverts these suggestions, ultimately departing entirely from

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<sup>149</sup> Ijoma Mangold, “‘Herkunft’: Die Deutschen überholen,” *Die Zeit*, October 14, 2019, [https://www.zeit.de/2019/12/herkunft-sasa-stanisic-roman-autobiografie?utm\\_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F](https://www.zeit.de/2019/12/herkunft-sasa-stanisic-roman-autobiografie?utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F); Sandra Kegel, “Rezension zum neuen Roman „Herkunft“ von Saša Stanišić,” *FAZ.NET*, March 18, 2019, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/buecher/rezensionen/belletristik/rezension-zum-neuen-roman-herkunft-von-sa-a-stani-i-16089790.html>.

<sup>150</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 2011, 6, <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822394716>.

any such form of the “autobiographical pact” that pertains to accurately or truthfully depict the life of the author when the text turns into a “Choose-Your-Own-Adventure Story” at the end.

*Herkunft* is however not labeled as an autobiography, although it does have autobiographical traits. The blurb, which consists of four statements that posit what the text *Herkunft* establishes this tendency: e.g., “Herkunft ist ein Buch über [...] eine zersplitterte Familie, die meine ist” [*Where you come from* is a book about [...] a fragmented family that’s mine].<sup>151</sup> The use of the personal pronoun “mein(e)” generates a relationship between Stanišić as author, Stanišić as narrator, and Stanišić as protagonist since it suggests congruence between the author and narrator – who we do not know until we read the book is indeed named Saša Stanišić. According to Philippe Lejeune, a text may be considered an autobiography when such identity of names is apparent: “L'autobiographie [...] suppose qu'il y ait identité de nom entre l'auteur (tel qu'il figure, par son nom, sur la couverture), le narrateur du récit et le personnage dont on parle” [identity of name between the author (such as he figures, by his name, on the cover), the narrator of the story, and the character that is being talked about].<sup>152</sup> The claim of autobiography through postulating this threefold identity results in certain expectations from the reader, namely that the narrated story is one that corresponds to the author’s lived reality. Lejeune termed this implicitly understood agreement as an “autobiographical pact.” According to a definition of the “autobiographical pact” in the *Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction*, the author in claiming the text as autobiography demonstrates the “commitment to the reader to write in such a serious way about [their] own life that the reader trusts that the author will tell [them] a true, and thus

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<sup>151</sup> This paratext is not included in the English translation of the book.

<sup>152</sup> Philippe Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique*, nouv. éd. augmentée (Paris: Éd. du Seuil, 2001), 23–24. Philippe Lejeune, “The Autobiographical Pact,” in *On Autobiography*, ed. Paul John Eakin, trans. Katherine M. Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 12.

autobiographical, story.”<sup>153</sup> There is an expectation of some sort of truth and relationship established between the reader and author in an autobiographical text.

This definition of autobiography has however become more nuanced, particularly in the case of autofiction. Coined by French writer Serge Doubrovsky in 1977 in relation to his novel *Fils*, autofiction purports to be both fictional and autobiographical at the same time.<sup>154</sup> It recognizes the referentiality to a real lived biographical experience of the author, who is most commonly synonymous with the protagonist, while also reflecting the mediation and constructed narrative of a written account of one’s life. In the case of Stanišić, autofiction may be a more pertinent description for the texts discussed in this chapter. While the protagonist of *Wie der Soldat das Grammofon repariert* does not share the same name as the author, much of the events experienced by the child Aleksandar correspond to ones in Stanišić’s own biography. With *Herkunft*, the connection is perhaps clearer while the genre marker for fictionality is not. However, the text is incredibly stylized and culminates in a Choose-Your-Own-Adventure-Story lending it a fictional flare.

Returning briefly to the definition of autobiography in the *Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction*, neither of Stanišić’s texts fulfil the criteria fully, specifically in the commitment to write “in such a serious way.” A sense of humor, wit, and fantasy pervade his texts. The playful tone highlights moments of hypocrisy or critique in his texts. For example, in *Herkunft* the narrator tells of the different era that his grandmother grew up in, describing the situation for women under socialism as follows: “Dann kam der Sozialismus und diskutierte die

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<sup>153</sup> Missinne, Lut, “2.3 Autobiographical Pact,” in *Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction*, ed. Wagner-Egelhaaf, Martina (De Gruyter, 2019), 222.

<sup>154</sup> Serge Doubrovsky, *Fils* (Paris: Galilée, 1977).

Rolle der Frau, und die Frau ging aus der Diskussion nach Hause und hängte die Wäsche auf” [H 22; Then came Socialism, with its discussions about the role of women, and the woman herself would leave the discussion and go back home to hang up the laundry, WYCF 18]. The narrator explicitly comments on the imbalance of gender roles at the time under the socialist regime when everyone was supposedly equal – at least according to the theory.

The playfulness in Stanišić’s texts is not only apparent in moments of critique, however it can also be seen in terms of the protagonists’ respective fantasy (particularly in the case of the child protagonist of *Soldat*) and own reflections on their future selves. Furthermore, this playfulness also makes its mark in terms of the texts’ form, often making it unclear what may or may not be autobiographical. The narrative defies the typical teleological bias of the *Bildungsroman* – to which I claim *Soldat* belongs –, playing with narrative perspectives and a fragmentary aesthetics where chapters are sometimes lists rather than narrative e.g., chapters “was ich eigentlich will” [S 149f.; What I really want SG 161ff.], “Chefgenosse des Unfertigen” [S 298-302; Comrade in Chief of all things unfinished SG 326 - 333].

In terms of form of the novel *Soldat*, Stanišić’s narrative becomes fragmentary and approaches “a mosaic” according to scholar Brigid Haines which she claims is the author’s way of “reflect[ing] the difficulty of representing war.”<sup>155</sup> Through his poetics of montage, the author destabilizes the plot to avoid the usual generic trajectories of coming-of-age novels through disrupting the chronology and teleological bias of the genre. The narrative is mostly focalized through the child Aleksandar and thus retains this *Bildungsroman* characteristic. However, the novel also presents several other perspectives, thus differing from typical *Bildungsromane* and

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<sup>155</sup> Haines, Brigid, “Sport, Identity and War in Saša Stanišić’s *Wie Der Soldat Das Grammofon Repariert*,” in *Aesthetics and Politics in Modern German Culture. Festschrift in Honour of Rhys W. Williams*, ed. Brigid Haines et al. (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010), 156.

from autobiographical texts too.<sup>156</sup> Admittedly, Stanišić does therefore rely heavily on the literary technique of montage for the purpose of relating this story and representing the gaps in Aleksandar's memory. However, more is at work in Stanišić's fragmented narrative, and I claim it is further evidence of the humor and playful tone of the novel.

As part of a narrative montage, Stanišić inserts a novel within the novel titled "Als alles gut war" (S 157-210; When Everything Was All Right, SG 173-231). It is not entirely clear when Aleksandar is supposed to have written this inner novel and there is disagreement among secondary literature. On the one hand, Didem Uca argues that the adult Aleksandar wrote these texts, on the other Vladimir Biti describes the inner novel as "an alleged child's story" while also questioning its status due to its position in the novel.<sup>157</sup> In my own reading of its status, I understand this inner novel's content as consisting of texts that Aleksandar wrote as a child which his grandmother later sends to the young adult who then edits and "publishes" them as "Als alles gut war." The title itself indicates that the adult Aleksandar compiles them since it retroactively reflects on his childhood in the preterit as the time when things *were* "all right."

The lack of clarity about the status of the inner novel and whether it was written by the adult or child protagonist demonstrates how Stanišić plays with the expectation of truth, or the truth claims of his autobiographical texts. In *Soldat*, the child perspective as well as multiple narrative perspectives serves as a reminder that this is not a straightforward "serious" telling as

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<sup>156</sup> E.g., his schoolfriend Zoran (S 61-66; SG 60-66), Rabbi Avram (S 100 –102; SG 104-106), Serbian occupier (S 129f.; SG 137f.), and his Grandma Katarina (S 155f.; SG 169-171).

<sup>157</sup> Didem Uca, "'Grissgott' Meets 'Kung Fu': Multilingualism, Humor, and Trauma in Saša Stanišić's *Wie Der Soldat Das Grammofon Repariert* (2006)," *Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Literatures* 73, no. 3 (July 3, 2019): 186, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00397709.2019.1633806>; Vladimir Biti, "Remembering Nowhere: The Homeland-on-the-Move in the Exile Writing of Saša Stanišić and Ismet Prcić," in *Post-Yugoslav Constellations*, ed. Vlad Beronja and Stijn Vervaeke (De Gruyter, 2016), 53, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110431575-004>.

suggested in Lut Missinne's definition of the autobiographical pact.<sup>158</sup> Indeed, another example of humor reflects the child's earnestness and innocence of the events to come: "Und der Krieg?, fragte ich. Der Krieg war uns auf den Fersen, hatte aber kein Visum für Italien, sagte Walross." [S 99; What about the war? I asked. The war was hard on our heels all the way, but it didn't have a visa for Italy, said Walrus. SG 103]. Aleksandar replies asking, "Hat er ein Visum für Višegrad?" [Does it have a visa for Višegrad? Ibid.]. The sincere question contrasts with the seriousness of the situation of the imminent war of which we as reader are aware. The discrepancy between Aleksandar being able to understand the situation and taking Walrus's word literally on visas brings a lightness while also a sense of foreboding that we the reader know more than the child whose point of view we read.

More evidently, in the blurb to *Herkunft* Stanišić reminds the reader of the constructed, mediated telling of his memory by highlighting the role of fiction in the book since he describes *Herkunft* as "ein Buch über meine Heimat, in der Erinnerung und *der Erfindung*" [a book about my homes, in remembering and in inventing].<sup>159</sup> Throughout the text, the fictional element and invention is not always clear, and the reader may consequently forget that they are reading a fictionalized and highly stylized account of the character Stanišić's life. The last section of the book, however, brings it back to the reader's attention. Harkening back to a genre the narrator mentions at the start, Stanišić concludes *Herkunft* with a *Choose-Your-Own-Adventure Story* titled "Der Drachenhort" [H 299-360; Dragon's Hoard, WYCF 295-353]. The text takes on the style of a gamebook and is written in the second person. The reader is thus invited to assume Stanišić's position and make decisions regarding how the story continues and eventually ends.

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<sup>158</sup> Missinne, Lut, "2.3 Autobiographical Pact," 222.

<sup>159</sup> Inside Cover. Emphasis added. Translation my own.

Multiple endings are therefore possible as to how Stanišić the protagonist says goodbye to his grandmother.

Thus, while his texts certainly appear to have autobiographical undertones, Stanišić subverts autobiographical convention as well as formal aspects of the novel itself, also deviating from typical autofictional narratives. The role of invention and fantasy are emphasized, as highlighted on the inside cover of *Herkunft* where Stanišić describes invention as one of his homes. In the earlier novel *Wie der Soldat das Gramofon repariert*, the opening chapter similarly establishes storytelling and invention as significant aspects of the protagonist's life, with Aleksandar's grandfather revealing to him that "die wertvollste Gabe ist die Erfindung, der größte Reichtum die Fantasie" [S 11; The most valuable gift of all is invention, imagination is your greatest wealth, SG 1].

## **Immigrant Literature**

The distancing from a straightforward autobiography and highlighting of the constructed nature of the text and its fictional elements serves perhaps as a counter to or protest against the inordinate interest in so-called "immigrant literature." In his later text *Herkunft*, for example, Stanišić as protagonist describes how in certain environments he experienced great fascination regarding his identity as "Bosnier und Geflüchteter" [a Bosnian and a refugee]. The narrator protagonist comments that "[I]m akademischen Umfeld war es oft Hauptpunkt des Interesses. Ich war vorbereitet, hatte zwei, drei Kriegsanekdokten parat, für mehr Leid reichte die Aufmerksamkeit nicht" [H 129; In academic environments, it was often a main point of interest. I was prepared - I had two or three little war stories ready and waiting; people's attention usually



didn't extend to any more suffering than that, WYCF 125]. The narrator's sardonic comment reveals the voyeuristic, exploitative interest in the biography of immigrants, expecting stories of trauma, while criticizing the attention span and short-lived interest in their stories – particularly in his experience at university.

Stanišić as author has likewise disparaged the label “immigrant literature” and “immigrant authors,” for example in “Three Myths of Immigrant Writing: A View from Germany.” Rejecting the grouping together of authors who have migrated or whose parents have migrated to Germany solely for the fact that they have this experience in common, Stanišić highlights that the stories of migration vary vastly, let alone before one begins to consider the various cultural, ethnic, religious, and social backgrounds of the authors. He protests that “the colors of the novels' covers has [sic] a greater literary relevance than our biographical backgrounds” [Ich würde behaupten, dass bei einem Roman die Farbe des Einbands literarisch stärker verbindet als der jeweilige biographische Hintergrund.]<sup>160</sup> Thus, Stanišić calls for a “thematically-oriented” approach to texts rather than one that scrutinizes similarities between an author's biography and that of characters in their novels.

The irony is not lost for my current project where I similarly group together a group of authors under the banner of an “Eastern perspective” or authors whose work deal with a “post-socialist memory.” My choice to group these authors together is to demonstrate the breadth and different aspects of “post-socialist memory” and to examine the different ways that it interacts in the network of European memory through looking at texts written by authors who have come from Eastern Europe. Not all texts in this dissertation are derived from the authors' biography

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<sup>160</sup> Stanišić, “Three Myths of Immigrant Writing: A View from Germany - Words Without Borders.” Stanišić, “Wie Ihr uns seht. Über drei Mythen vom Schreiben der Migranten,” 104–5.

(e.g., the theater text by multiple authors), yet in my analysis of Stanišić, I show how autobiography is nevertheless an important category to consider.

Autobiographical elements or influences pervade *Wie der Soldat das Grammophon repariert* and *Herkunft* since several narrative events align with instances that cross over with Stanišić's own biography (e.g., fleeing to Heidelberg, living in Hamburg, passion for football) – not to mention the complication and play with the autobiographical pact where the name of the protagonist, author, and narrator are identical in the latter text. Stanišić as narrator in *Herkunft* opines on the nature of fiction when his Bosnian grandmother asks if his first novel, of which he brought her a copy (however in German), is about their family:

Fiktion, wie ich sähe [...] bilde eine eigene Welt, statt unsere abzubilden, und die hier, ich klopfte auf den Umschlag, sei eine Welt, in der Flüsse sprechen und Urgroßeltern ewig leben. Fiktion, wie ich sie mir denke, sagte ich, ist ein offenes System aus Erfindung, Wahrnehmung und Erinnerung, das sich am wirklich Geschehenen reibt – (H 20)

Fiction, as I see it, [...] creates its own world, it doesn't portray ours, and the one in here, I said, slapping the book's cover, is a world where rivers speak and great-grandparents live forever. Fiction, in my view, I said, is an open system of invention, perception, and memory that rubs up against real events... (WYCF 16)

The protagonist Stanišić's statement on his first novel reads as a poetological statement that equally pertains to the author Stanišić's own writing style. I read the reflection on the writing process as a mixture of "invention, perception, and memory" that leans on "real events" as a metatextual comment on the current text also, and not only pertaining to the novel the protagonist Stanišić is describing – which if we were to understand the protagonist Stanišić to be the empiric author himself, he is alluding to Stanišić's first novel *Wie der Soldat das Grammophon repariert* in which rivers do indeed speak. However, while some narrative facts align with the author Stanišić's biography, I do not wish to read these works with a *sole* biographic lens, i.e., I

do not seek to highlight moments of the text that agree with his biography in this chapter. Rather, I analyze the workings of memory of the immigrant protagonists and how they are woven or connected to a wider German or European network, ultimately seeking to demonstrate the multifaceted nature of a post-socialist memory that is demonstrated through the different authors that I have brought together in this dissertation. In this way, I read how the author Stanišić's fictional texts interweave the literary and the "real," creating a montage of lists, notes, fantasy, intertextual references, and play with genre.

### **A Post-Socialist *Bildungsroman*?**

Similar to my analysis of Nino Haratischwili's *Das achte Leben (für Brilka)* in Chapter Two, I argue that post-socialist memory and an eastern perspective inherent in the work shows in the author's approach to a particular narrative genre. Whereas Haratischwili engages with the *Generationenroman*, Stanišić's first novel *Wie der Soldat das Grammofon repariert* plays with the genre of the *Bildungsroman*.

The *Bildungsroman* as it emerged in the 18<sup>th</sup> century typically follows an individual protagonist from youth to adulthood in a "coming-of-age" story. The prose genre portrays the "inner story" of the typically male naive protagonist as he struggles with aspects of social reality that often do not align with the young idealist's view of the world. Formative experiences result in an eventual establishment of an *Ich*-identity (*Ich-Findung*). After this process of *Bildung*, the protagonist is ultimately reunited with a community, entering his role in society. This community is often understood in national terms. While Christoph Martin Wieland's *Geschichte des Agathon* (1766) is considered the first example of the genre, Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters*

*Lehrjahre* (1795) constitutes its epitome. The narrative is narrated chronologically with one storyline (*einsträngig*) in its ideal form.

More recently, Benjamin Kohlmann has suggested that an important 20<sup>th</sup>-century subgenre of the *Bildungsroman* exists and that it has been neglected in scholarship.<sup>161</sup> According to Kohlmann, characteristics of the socialist subgenre include invocation of key socialist events (e.g., the October Revolution, the 1930s Popular Front). In discussions of the *Bildungsroman*, scholars frequently refer to *The Theory of the Novel* by György Lukács, yet Kohlmann highlights Lukács's later essay "Critical Realism and Social Realism" in which he already identifies the subgenre in 1956. Lukács writes that the "socialist counterpart [to the typical bourgeois *Bildungsroman*] often begins with the crisis of consciousness the adult bourgeois intellectual experiences when confronted with socialism."<sup>162</sup> While Kohlmann claims the socialist *Bildungsroman* evinces "continuities [with] its bourgeois precursor"<sup>163</sup> the *Bildung* at stake in this socialist version concerns a secondary one, namely the protagonist's becoming aware of socialism. He argues, for example, that socialist writers turned to the genre in an attempt to reckon with the problems presented by international socialism as its aim did not align with how real existing socialism was being practiced – i.e., the latter faced multiple setbacks that ultimately led to a retreat within largely national borders (e.g., Stalin's policy of socialism within one country). Kohlmann proposes, therefore, that "the socialist *Bildungsroman* maintains an uneasy relationship with the idea of national closure, precisely because the protagonist's retreat

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<sup>161</sup> Benjamin Kohlmann, "Toward a History and Theory of the Socialist *Bildungsroman*," *Novel* 48, no. 2 (August 1, 2015): 167–89, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00295132-2882601>.

<sup>162</sup> György Lukács, "Critical Realism and Socialist Realism," in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (London: Merlin Press, 1963), 113.

<sup>163</sup> Kohlmann, "Toward a History and Theory of the Socialist *Bildungsroman*," 174.

within the borders of the nation would seem to acknowledge the failure of socialist internationalism.”<sup>164</sup>

As mentioned above, Stanišić’s first novel *Wie der Soldat das Grammophon repariert* is often associated with the *Bildungsroman* genre. It is a coming-of-age novel that follows the young protagonist into early adulthood where he searches for his childhood friend. The text defies, however, certain characteristics that are typically associated with this genre. While not all *Bildungsromane* are narrated chronologically, the inclusion of multiple narrative perspectives in Stanišić’s example pokes holes at its designation as a *Bildungsroman*. What most distinctly defies its categorization as a *Bildungsroman* or pushes back against it however is the struggle against or even lack of a teleological “Bildungsziel.”

Didem Uca suggests that the novel “can be classified as a transnational Bildungsroman” as it features “a young protagonist coming of age under multilingual, multicultural circumstances.”<sup>165</sup> I agree with Uca’s assessment that Stanišić has written a transnational *Bildungsroman* that transcends the national focus of the bourgeois novel. In this way, I argue that Stanišić overcomes the dialectical relationship between the nation and the international of the socialist novels. I would like to suggest that the transnational aspect of the novel relates to a post-socialist sensibility. I claim that *Soldat* constitutes an example of a *post-socialist Bildungsroman* since it draws on tendencies of the socialist *Bildungsroman* model in its attempt to think transnationally. It looks at the tension between a place of origin and new migrant home of origin and is thus a truly 21<sup>st</sup> century example of the genre in the global migrant age without reducing it

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<sup>164</sup> Kohlmann, 184.

<sup>165</sup> Uca, “‘Grissgott’ Meets ‘Kung Fu,’” 185.

to the duality of “original” home/new home. As I detail below, Stanišić explores the relationship between multiple origins more fully in *Herkunft*.

Stanišić transcends the socialist *Bildungsroman* as he does not present the socialist struggle “from the inside” as Kohlmann and Lukács write of the subgenre. Instead, his post-socialist *Bildungsroman* is post-socialist firstly in a temporal sense since the author writes after the collapse of state socialism in Eastern Europe. It is also post-socialist in the sense that he writes from a position where the protagonist experienced the collapse of one multinational unity, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which disintegrated and returned to single nations, yet lives within another transnational union, the European Union. The protagonist further narrates a transnational experience from his new home and the formative experiences of his experience of migrating to a new system in Western Germany. The post-socialist aspects of his novel reflect the experience on returning to a community that is no longer there (e.g., the Bosniak population, or Yugoslavia as a nation). At the same time, Stanišić includes reflection on the community that his protagonists eventually enter (i.e., Germany) where their experiences as a migrant reveal that their new context is insular, national, and not open to diversity in terms of memory.

While Kohlmann maintains that the socialist example of the *Bildungsroman* does not seek to be formally adventurous and subvert typical conventions of the genre,<sup>166</sup> I claim Stanišić does so in his post-socialist novel through his narrative montage approach and insistence on the presence of narrator and reader. Stanišić similarly embraces some typical aspects of the *Bildungsroman*, such as reflection on the relationship between a community and the individual, the focus on young protagonists, and a formative experience of loss (e.g., their home) that leads

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<sup>166</sup> Kohlmann, “Toward a History and Theory of the Socialist Bildungsroman,” 170.

to the protagonist entering upon a journey towards a new home. However, the trajectory and eventual “home” is not finite and certainly not closed off. Rather than appealing to the “endlessly deferred telos” of socialism as the case is in the socialist *Bildungsroman*,<sup>167</sup> or the teleological bias in the typical iteration of the *Bildungsroman* where a bourgeois protagonist enters into a (national) society, Stanišić removes a telos or final goal that his protagonists could subsequently reach.

In *Soldat*, Aleksander remarks on a similar urge to avoid an end: “Ich bin gegen das Enden, gegen das Kaputtwerden! Das Fertige muss aufgehalten werden! Ich bin der Chefgenosse für das Immerweitergehen und unterstütze das Undsoweiter!” [S 23; I’m against endings, I’m against things being over. Being finished should be stopped! I am Comrade Chief of going on and on, I support furthermore and et cetera!, SG 15]. While said in the context of a child and framed by the juvenile desire for things not to end (e.g., he mentioned the holidays never ending so that school cannot begin again, or Sundays should never end so Mondays don’t come), the statement serves as an almost poetological statement for the novel – and *Herkunft* too. His protagonists’ meta commentaries on writing, stories, and narrative emphasize and gesture outside of Stanišić’s texts, pointing instead to the inability or even refusal to end a story which culminates in the epitome of what Aleksander as the “Chefgenossen des Unfertigen” [S 11; Comrade in Chief of the Unfinished, SG 1] describes here or in the *Choose-Your-Own-Adventure Story* in *Herkunft* where multiple endings or reading experiences are possible.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Kohlmann, 170.

<sup>168</sup> Although it is important to note that I am not claiming that *Herkunft* is a *Bildungsroman*, merely that ideas that initially take fruition in *Soldat*, are fully realized in *Herkunft*.

Stanišić maintains the international horizon of socialism as I argue above, yet his writing is distinctly present: In relating the past, the narrative voice consistently comments and interjects with resonances to the narrative present – particularly in *Herkunft*. For example, towards the beginning of the text, the narrator Stanišić attempts to “begin” the text reflecting on his origins – which, of course, the reader has already been reading for several chapters. His impulse to write about his biography comes from a requirement to write a handwritten chronology of his life (*Lebenslauf*) for the Alien Registration Office (*Ausländerbehörde*) to gain German citizenship in a chapter titled “An die Ausländerbehörde” [S 6; To the Alien Registration Office, SG 2] The chapter title signals outside of the book in its address – an aspect of Stanišić’s writing that immediately conjures presence and which is more overt later in the text when the narrator addresses the reader in the du-form – and made explicitly evident in the English translation of the title as *Where You Come From*. In his reflection on how to write about his origins, Stanišić highlights the complex nature of identity and what makes up “where we come from”:

Diese Geschichte beginnt mit einem Bauern namens Gavriilo, nein, mit einer Regennacht in Višegrad, nein, mit meiner dementen Großmutter, nein. Diese Geschichte beginnt mit dem Befeuern der Welt durch das Addieren von Geschichten.

Nur noch eine! Nur noch eine!

Ich werde einige Male ansetzen und einige Enden finden, ich kenne mich doch. Ohne Abschweifung wären meine Geschichten überhaupt nicht meine. Die Abschweifung ist Modus meines Schreibens. *My own adventure*. (H 37, emphasis in original).

The story begins with a farmer named Gavriilo, no, with a rainy night in Višegrad, no, with my grandmother who has dementia, no. The story begins with the world being set alight by the addition of stories.

Another one! Another one!

I’ll take more stabs at it and find a lot more endings. I know how I work. My stories just wouldn’t be mine without digressions. Digression is my mode of writing. *My Own Adventure*. (WYCF 33)



The narrative voice describes the process of writing in this metatextual episode and hints multidirectionally across the entire text: towards the actual beginning of the extant text, namely with the narrator's grandmother with dementia, and towards the end of the text with the "Choose your own adventure story" where indeed "einige Enden" are possible. The narrator Stanišić's conjecture on the narrative and his own process of writing through digression (Abschweifung) already shows that the question of origin and the stories, or memories, that make up a life are intricately connected and not separable – the stories are synchronously beginnings to the narrator's story while at the same time never revealing the full pictures since it is necessary to also begin the tale from another beginning at the same time "durch das Addieren von Geschichten."

One of the origins that the narrator alludes to serves as the first chapter of the actual text *Herkunft*. Similarly, the expository one-page chapter indicates the convolution of time and narrative in this tale by way of the grandmother's failing health since she is meandering a street calling out for herself as a girl. The narrator succinctly summarizes that "Großmutter ist siebenundachtzig Jahre alt und gleichzeitig 11 Jahre alt [H 5; Grandmother is eighty-seven years old and eleven years old, WYCF 1]. The framing of the text by way of the grandmother's deteriorating memory highlights the importance of generations in matters of memory, not only in terms of familial but also socio-political memory, since in this episode the narrator alludes to the former Yugoslavia. Without explicitly calling up the country's violent disintegration, Stanišić also frames the text with the nation's history by calling attention to the change of street name over the years that his grandmother is on: "meine Großmutter [...] auf der Straße, die einmal den Namen Josip Broz Tito getragen hat und heute den Namen des verschwundenen Mädchens trägt als Hall, Kristina!, ruft meine Großmutter, ruft ihren eigenen Namen: Kristina! [H 5; my

grandmother [...] on the street that once bore the name of Josip Broz Tito and today bears the name of the vanished girl as an echo, Kristina! my grandmother shouts, shouting her own name: Kristina!, WYCF 1]. The narrator reminds of Yugoslavian history via this reference to the former president Tito's name and highlights this history as prominent to his family's story through only naming the street's former name (i.e., Tito) and not what the street was renamed to. The repetition of the grandmother's name Kristina and the sound-image of her name echoing in this street once bearing Tito's name shows the enmeshment of familial and socio-political memory.

### **Familial Memory**

*Soldat* is similarly framed by familial memory. The expository chapters of both texts establish the narrative world in relation to the (imminent) death of a grandparent: In *Herkunft*, Stanišić as narrator tells of his grandmother's failing memory which becomes the occasion for him to examine where he comes from; And *Soldat* begins with the recollection of its protagonist Aleksander on the day that his grandfather died. Like the generational structure present in Haratschwili's novel discussed in Chapter Two, the intergenerational relationship plays a significant role in Stanišić's texts in matters of memory.

Unlike other examples of intergenerational memory transfer discussed in this dissertation, *Soldat* is framed by the grandfather/grandson relationship. On the day of his death, Opa Slavko crafts Aleksander a magician's hat and wand, proclaiming to Aleksandar "[v]ieles wirst du revolutionieren können, solange es mit den Ideen von Tito konform geht und in Übereinstimmung mit den Statuen des Bundes der Kommunisten Jugoslawiens steht" [S 11; You'll be able to revolutionize all sorts of things, just as long as they're in line with Tito's ideas and the Statutes

of the Communist League of Yugoslavia, SG 1]. The grandfather is frequently characterized through his identification and patriotism to Yugoslavia. The second association the child connects with his grandfather is of stories and imagination, with the child narrator naming his grandfather's favorite places as "in den besten Geschichten oder unter dem Parteibüro" and therefore where he should be buried [S 13; in his best stories, or underneath the Party office, SG 4]. The two "places" – one physical and the other intangible – set the stage for the novel, where family, invention, and the memory of former Yugoslavia and its disintegration are key threads.

The family as a site of cultural memory is particularly interesting for my project, since an often neglected side of collective or even official memory can be examined here. The stories that appear via family narratives do not solely focus on questions of dictatorship and oppression but can reveal the everyday. These everyday accounts offer an additional point of view to dominant memory regarding Eastern Europe – particularly propagated by a Western view on Eastern Europe that heavily focuses on dictatorship and persecution. This is not to say, however, that stories of persecution and life under a repressive regime that explore trauma more fully are not also constitutive of a post-socialist memory – as I discussed in Chapter One in the case of Herta Müller under Ceausescu's regime in Romania. Astrid Erll poignantly summarizes that "families serve as a kind of switchboard between the individual memory and larger frames of collective remembrance."<sup>169</sup> Families – in whatever constellation they appear<sup>170</sup> – create their own systems

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<sup>169</sup> Astrid Erll, "Locating Family in Cultural Memory Studies," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 42, no. 3 (May 1, 2011): 315, <https://doi.org/10.3138/jcfs.42.3.303>.

<sup>170</sup> While the family as a unit is not defined as such and can encompass different variations, much of the theory and discussion on "the family" centers around a Western European heteronormative model of mother, father, child. In the case of this chapter, the family in the texts similarly consists of mother, father, child, and grandparents.

of reference and frameworks for memory as a social group and constitute sites where memory can be continuously (re)constructed.<sup>171</sup>

In Haratischwili's model of the intergenerational transaction of memory, stories and familial memory are passed down to each subsequent generation – and as I argued in Chapter Two, the later generations are reciprocally able to inflect familial memory. In Stanišić's *Wie der Soldat das Grammophon repariert*, while this model is still apparent (for example in the stories told by the grandfather about Yugoslavia), the figure of the grandparent does not act solely as a vector of memory as in Haratischwili's *Das achte Leben (für Brilka)*. Rather, the grandparent becomes a referent for a system that has since disappeared – especially in the case of the grandfather in *Soldat*. The older generation of Stanišić's families represent a generation who spent most of their adult lives in Yugoslavia, and in the case of the grandfather in *Soldat* did not experience its disintegration, imparting a sense of the “old system” that lives on in the memory of the grandparent themselves. Whereas the grandparent represents socialism as in the past, the younger generation represented by the protagonists show the legacy after state socialism and the oppressive structures it enabled and are part of a “post-socialist” generation that engages with both socialist and capitalist systems in a way that seeks to transcend this duality.<sup>172</sup> Through the relations and the memory at work, it is possible to think of the post-socialist memory in a way that is not complete, but is ongoing and open to the future. It is a future-oriented memory that

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<sup>171</sup> Cf. Astrid Erll's helpful article on familial and collective memory where she delineates Maurice Halbwachs theory of collective memory and how it relates to the unit of the family in cultural memory studies. Erll, “Locating Family in Cultural Memory Studies.”

<sup>172</sup> I am grateful for Miglena Todorova's talk “Theorizing ‘Postsocialism(s)’” for her insights into post socialist studies. Miglena Todorova, “Theorizing ‘Postsocialism(s)’: Racial, Gender, and Political Aspects” (FeminEast Series, Center for European Studies, Rutgers University, November 29, 2022).

questions both the previous and current systems while seeking to intervene through a new perspective into teleological narratives.

In *Herkunft*, the familial framing is also apparent in the adult narrator and protagonist's recollection of the rise of nationalism across Yugoslavia. In a chapter titled "Tod dem Faschismus, Freiheit dem Volke" [Death to Fascism, Freedom to the People], Stanišić's eponymous narrator conceives of Yugoslavia as a "multiperspektivisch[e] Erzählung" [multiperspective story] as well as using architectural metaphors (e.g., Der Kitt der multiethnischen Idee, H 98; The glue of the multiethnic idea, WYCF 94). He describes Tito "als die wichtigste Erzählstimme des jugoslawischen Einheitsplots" [the central voice telling the story of Yugoslavian unity], remarking that after his death "die neuen Erzähler hießen Milošević, Izetbegović, Tuđman. Sie gingen auf eine lange Lesereise zu *ihrem* Volk" [H 98, emphasis in original; the new narrators were named Milošević, Izetbegović, Tudjman. They went on long reading tours, visiting *their* people, WYCF 94] before listing the historical events by means of narrative categories:<sup>173</sup>

*Genre:* Wutrede mit Appellcharakter  
*Rahmen:* Erratische Politik der Achtziger, Wirtschaftskrise und Inflation.  
*Sujet:* Das eigene Volk als Opfer. Ehrverletzung, erlittene Ungerechtigkeiten, verlorene Schlachten. Der *Andere* als Feind.  
*Hauptfiguren:* Wenigverdiener und Arbeitslose von heute und vor Jahrhunderten gefallene Krieger  
*Erzählte Zeit:* Etwa achthundert Jahre.  
*Stil:* Imperative. Symbole über Symbole. Brachiale Bilder. Dräuende Ahnungen (H 98f.)<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Slobodan Milošević was the president of Serbia (1991-1997); Alija Izetbegović the president of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992-1995); and Franjo Tuđman president of Croatia (1990-1999).

<sup>174</sup> Other categories include "Perspektive" [Point of view], "Botschaft" [Message], "Argumentationslinie" [Line of argument], and "Rezipienten" [Audience].

*Genre:* Rant with overtones of call-to-arms.  
*Context:* The erratic political milieu of the eighties – economic crisis, inflation.  
*Subject:* Their own people as victims. Loss of honor. In justices suffered, battles lost. The Other as enemy.  
*Main characters:* The underpaid and unemployed of today; the fallen warriors of centuries past  
*Time covered by the story:* Eight hundred years (apx.).  
*Style:* Imperative. Symbol after symbol. Violent images. Dark forebodings. (WYCF 94f.)

The narrator Stanišić frames this list and breakdown of historical events into narrative categories by means of a childhood event. The adult narrator first describes the growing atmosphere of unrest, relating how the various “narrators” and their manifestos were supported and repeated by intellectuals and media, summing up his paragraph by referring to a previous familial scene from the beginning of *Herkunft* in which his father is reading a newspaper and dancing with his mother and a snake. Zooming in on his father reading the new narrators’ words in the newspaper distances the sociopolitical events through the contrast between the grand “Lesereise” and the simple dance in the garden between the child’s parents – while it also foreshadows the tumultuous time ahead for the family and its escape from the ensuing ethnic violence.

### *Ein Weltmeister des Erinnerns*

By conceiving the geopolitical space of the former Yugoslavia as a narrative with multiple narrators in the respective states, Stanišić highlights the different perspectives and narratives that co-existed in 1990s Yugoslavia that led to the loaded atmosphere and incitements to ethnic hatred. The narrator through a list of paratactic exclamations reveals his shock at the developments in the former federal republic in the following paragraph, ultimately posing a

rhetorical question about the football team Red Star Belgrade (Crvena zvezda) winning the European Cup in 1991 that Yugoslavians had celebrated together: “Ausgerechnet hier! Auf diesem Balkan, Mann! An der Kreuzung zwischen Orient and Okzident! [...] Hatten wir nicht die Tore von *Roter Stern* gemeinsam bejubelt? Offenbar nicht.” [H 99f.; Here of all places! In the Balkans! At the crossroads of East and West [...] Didn’t we cheer the Red Star goals together?, WYCF 95f.].

This shock then echoes or affectively touches a moment from the narrative present, as Stanišić as narrator draws out of his flashback to relate what is happening as he is writing. Beginning with the date “29<sup>th</sup> August 2018,” he highlights the amount of time that has passed since the violence and tension in former Yugoslavia and tells of demonstrations in Chemnitz against migrants. This leads Stanišić as narrator to remark that “der Hitler-Gruß hing über der Gegenwart” [H 100; the Hitler salute hangs over the present, WYCF 96],<sup>175</sup> creating a resonance with yet another memory of nationalism. By mentioning the neo-Nazi presence at the contemporaneous demonstrations in Chemnitz, Stanišić connects two histories of violence on the European continent as a future, or rather, present-oriented warning, using a multidirectional comparison between the Yugoslav wars and World War Two as an ethical impetus to act against the rising xenophobia as seen in the Chemnitz demonstrations.

In Stanišić’s earlier novel *Soldat*, Aleksandar’s friend Zoran as narrator of a chapter also makes a striking reference to the Second World War in the form of a citation and adaptation of Paul Celan’s poem “Todesfuge” (Deathfuge, 1948): “Ich lese und liebe das Lesen, der Tod ist

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<sup>175</sup> It was reported that during the 2018 Chemnitz demonstrations the Hitler salute was seen: E.g., “Chemnitz: Hitlergruß bei Demo gezeigt - Bewährungsstrafe für 33-Jährigen,” *Der Spiegel*, September 13, 2018, <https://www.spiegel.de/panorama/justiz/chemnitz-hitlergruss-bei-demo-bewahrungsstrafe-fuer-33-jaehrigen-a-1227924.html>.

ein Meister aus Deutschland, er ist gerade ein Weltmeister aus Bosnien. Ich hasse die Brücke” [S 145; I like to read. Death is a German champion and a Bosnian outright world champion. I hate the bridge, SG 156]. After directly citing “Todesfuge” – “der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland” – Stanišić adapts Celan’s designation of death as the “Meister” from Germany to “Weltmeister” from Bosnia. The metaphor “Weltmeister” is an example of the role of sport in Stanišić’s first novel – and even in the later *Herkunft* where the narrator is incredulous of the increasing hatred when Yugoslavians had previously been united in supporting a successful football team as mentioned above.<sup>176</sup> In 2006 – the year that *Wie der Soldat das Grammophon repariert* was published – Germany was the host nation for the men’s football FIFA World Cup for the first time as a unified country.<sup>177</sup> Often dubbed the “Sommermärchen von 2006” [Summer’s Tale of 2006], the World Cup was the catalyst for discussions on pride, nationalism, and identity in contemporary Germany.<sup>178</sup> The reference to “Weltmeister” in *Soldat* dramatizes contemporaneous events while referring back to 1954, the first time Germany won the World Cup and were “Weltmeister” less than a decade after the end of World War Two. Thus, Stanišić keeps the Holocaust in view in light of the topical debates surrounding national pride and identity through the reference to Celan in *Soldat*.

The ensuing debate around “Weltmeister” and the call to pride in the German flag after years of “shame,” led to some deeming Germany a “Weltmeister im Erinnern,” a title that Aleida

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<sup>176</sup> Cf. Haines on sport in *Wie der Soldat das Grammophon repariert*: Haines, Brigid, “Sport, Identity and War in Saša Stanišić’s *Wie Der Soldat Das Grammophon Repariert*.”

<sup>177</sup> Previously, Germany had hosted the competition as West Germany in 1974.

<sup>178</sup> The nickname is in reference to the film “Deutschland: Ein Sommermärchen” by director Sönke Wortmann [2006] who accompanied the men’s national football team during preparations for and during the tournament. The title of the film itself is a reference to Heinrich Heine’s *Deutschland: Ein Wintermärchen*, a satirical epic poem.



Assmann deems absurd.<sup>179</sup> Assmann describes a “paradox” situation where Germany is praised abroad for its commemorative culture (*Erinnerungskultur*) and willingness to recognize its past crimes, yet domestically this is seen as a “Dorn im Auge” [thorn in the eye].<sup>180</sup> Seeing Germany as the sole country that defined itself by a negative event – namely the crimes of the Holocaust – domestic critics saw the past as overcome, and therefore no longer relevant to the younger generation of Germans. In this context, Stanišić’s entanglement of Bosnian and German memories reads as a warning or reminder of the dangers of increasing nationalistic identity, and the need to remember. Indeed, political scientist and director of The Berlin International Center for the Study of Antisemitism Clemens Heni sees the seeds of the current issues of AfD popularity as linked to the summer of 2006, topics that Stanišić himself addresses in the later text *Herkunft* (e.g., xenophobia in Chemnitz).<sup>181</sup>

At the same time, the “Weltmeister” sentence works at the level of the narrative present to remind of the rising nationalism in 1990s Bosnia. Simultaneously alluding to Aleksandar’s passion for football, the escalation from “Meister” to “Weltmeister” together with the temporal adverb “gerade” highlights the scale of violence in the Bosnian wars. Despite using the clearly competitive term “Weltmeister,” I claim that Stanišić is not, however, establishing a relationship of competition through this comparison (i.e., the model of competitive memory), but rather cites Celan’s key text of Holocaust memory in order to emphasize that nationalism and ethnic cleansing still existed in post-1989 Europe: “The bridge” that Zoran mentions alludes to the

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<sup>179</sup> Assmann, *Das neue Unbehagen an der Erinnerungskultur*, 59.

<sup>180</sup> Assmann, 60.

<sup>181</sup> Katja Thorwarth, “‘Sommermärchen bereitete der AfD den Boden’ Gespräch mit dem Antisemitismusforscher Clemens Heni,” August 29, 2019, <https://www.fr.de/kultur/sommermaerchen-bereitete-boden-11002689.html>.

historic Mehmed Paša Sokolović Bridge over the Drina river in Višegrad, a Bosnian city where Bosniaks were murdered as part of the ethnic cleansing by Serb military forces at the beginning of the Bosnian War.

Since the turn of the millenium, there was a general narrative of peace on the continent that ignored the fact that violence occurred after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War. Prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, World War Two is often cited as the last time war was present on the European continent. In an Op-Ed for the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, for example, Jürgen Habermas first wrote "nach 77 Jahren ohne Krieg" [after 77 years without war] images of war have returned. Later edited to "77 Jahre nach dem Ende des Zweiten Weltkriegs" [77 years after the end of the Second World War], Habermas makes claim to a peaceful Europe that had not seen war since 1945 (i.e., the Cold War).<sup>182</sup> In the same sentence, Habermas refers to 1989 as another key date as the end for the last time a war was potentially threatening Europe that was only averted due to the fear of mutual destruction.<sup>183</sup> In German collective memory, 1945 and 1989 are of course pivotal dates and more present as a reference frame to an ending of violence, but as we see with Habermas's quote general claims to a European memory often reference these dates also, thus forgetting or not fully acknowledging the Balkan region as contributing to European memory. In citing Celan and adapting the famous line from "Todesfuge" Stanišić reminds his readers of the violence during the disintegration of Yugoslavia and shows how this post-Yugoslav or post-socialist memory is also key to European memory

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<sup>182</sup> Habermas, Jürgen, "Krieg und Empörung. Jürgen Habermas zur Ukraine."

<sup>183</sup> Habermas writes "33 Jahre nach Beendigung eines nur im Gleichgewicht des Schreckens bewahrten, wenn auch bedrohten Friedens" [33 years after the end of a threatened peace that was only kept in the balance of terror]. Habermas, Jürgen.

through engaging with it multidirectionally: He is not competing with Holocaust memory but creating resonances with it to make space for the memory of the Yugoslav wars.

### **Intertextual Network**

Zoran's mentioning of "the bridge" also presents a further intertextual reference in Stanišić's work. It alludes to *Na Drini ćuprija* (*The Bridge over the Drina*, 1945) by Nobel Laureate Ivo Andrić, a Yugoslav writer who is mentioned earlier in the novel. Andrić's novel chronicles four centuries of Višegrad history spanning from its construction under the Ottomans to the bridge's damage in the First World War. Haines describes *Wie der Soldat das Grammofon repariert* as a "homage to, and continuation of" Andrić's novel, and indeed it does tell of the later history of Višegrad through the refracted memory of its child protagonist. Yet it also goes further by following the lines of memory and how they are intertwined with German history. The bridge serves as a metaphorical one between the two collective memories that transforms both respectively, connecting post-socialist memories to German ones. Through this reference to Andrić that directly follows a citation of Celan, Stanišić creates an entanglement of memory, or a "Wollknäuel" to use Haratschwili's image, between German and Bosnian collective memory and intimates the multidirectionality of memory in this migrant's story.

Stanišić's protagonist Aleksandar makes this entangled relationship apparent when he states "ich sammle die deutsche Sprache. Sammeln wiegt die schweren Antworten und die schweren Gedanken auf, die ich habe, wenn ich an Višegrad denke [S, 140; I'm collecting words in my new language. Collecting helps to make up for the hard answers and sad thoughts I have when I think of Višegrad, SG 150]. The child Aleksandar's collecting of German as

counterbalance to his memories of his native Bosnia reveals how entangled his memories are. It shows how it is impossible to conceive of the memories of the Yugoslav wars as separate from his later German ones and that they dialectically belong to both Bosnian and German memory at the same time.

The intertextuality between *Wie der Soldat das Grammophon repariert* and Celan's poem is not the only reference to texts from postwar German literature. In the novel within a novel from *Soldat*, which I earlier argued was written as a child and compiled as an adult, an Eastern European perspective on socio-political events is apparent. Aleksandar conceives, for example, of East Germany as the "better part" of the country rather than the West: "Im besseren Deutschland ist eine Wand umgefallen und ab jetzt gibt es nur noch das schlechtere Deutschland" [S 174; A wall has fallen down in the better part of Germany, and now only the not-so-good part of Germany is left, SG 190]. Stanišić reinforces that this Eastern European perspective on Germany is not just a "false" one from Aleksandar's childhood that has since been "rectified" since his migration to Germany and the eventual disintegration of Yugoslavia: For while the status of these "childhood" texts as truthful is admittedly unclear (since they were written by a child), the fact that the adult Aleksandar assembles them in this manner and selects the title "Als alles gut war" for the inner novel as an adult lends them weight.

Stanišić introduces this perspective multidirectionally into the German collective through highlighting the difference in opinions that existed in 1989. While it is perhaps provocative to claim only the "schlechtere Deutschland" remains, the unclear status of the texts throughout Stanišić's novel complicates matters. The narrator challenges the commonly held view that see the GDR as the "worse" part by mere virtue that it is a failed state. The inherent humor and irony tangible in this passage – and throughout the novel – wink at the simple duality of better/worse

and lack of thought that neatly accepts the system that remains as the inherently “better” one.

While of course I do not seek to lessen the repressive nature of the GDR regime and the culture of informants, I argue that Stanišić through using the child’s naive point of view on the events questions the way that the East is viewed through this example of Eastern Germany.

Stanišić introduces this point earlier in the novel with an allusion to Günter Grass’s *Die Blechtrommel* [The Tin Drum, 1959] when Aleksandar states “ich [werde] vielleicht irgendwann aufhören [...], zu wachsen” [S 78; I suppose I’ll stop growing some day, SG 79]. As a key text of the postwar period and prominent example of the *Bildungsroman* genre in German and world literature, Grass’s *Die Blechtrommel* presents an interesting intertextual reference in *Soldat*. The first book of the former’s so-called “Danzig Trilogy,”<sup>184</sup> *Die Blechtrommel* tells the story of Oskar Matzerath. Born with the intelligence and awareness of an adult, Oskar decides to no longer grow past his third birthday, retaining the appearance of a three-year-old. Oskar narrates his life story that largely traces the arc of National Socialism while he is staying at a mental institute – thus he gives a highly subjective account and frequently reveals himself to be an unreliable narrator (e.g., the conflicting stories of his alleged fathers’ deaths) in a “parody” of the *Bildungsroman* genre.<sup>185</sup> *Die Blechtrommel* differs in this way, I argue, from *Soldat* in that Stanišić does not present a parody despite the playful and, at times, picaresque tone. Moreover, the reader is not invited to doubt Aleksandar’s story with no overt conflicting perspectives presented within the novel itself.

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<sup>184</sup> John Reddick, *The “Danzig Trilogy” of Günter Grass: A Study of The Tin Drum, Cat and Mouse, and Dog Years* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975).

<sup>185</sup> Peter Arnds, “Günter Grass and Magical Realism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Günter Grass*, ed. Stuart Taberner, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 63, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521876704.005>.

Where Grass's novel explores and casts doubt on Oskar's personal subjective memory, Stanišić highlights variations in perspective relating to collective memory, particularly in relation to a Yugoslavian or Eastern European one. Rather than understanding the reference to Grass and Aleksandar's words in a literal sense (i.e., that the child Aleksandar no longer grows), I claim that this pertains to the child's Eastern European perspective which Stanišić emphasizes as a particular perspective that continued to exist and did not automatically get erased and replaced by a new (Western) narrative. The author challenges hegemonic ideas of Eastern Europe as an undesirable place or one of failure (i.e., since the communist state ceased to exist) and suggests that these post-socialist memories belong to a German collective memory. Stanišić's reference to Grass distinctly situates his own novel in direct relation to German-language literary traditions and thus as a thoroughly German text itself. Through his choice of *Die Blechtrommel*, a novel of world literature, as intertext, Stanišić at the same time acknowledges a wider global network, therefore simultaneously relating to both the global and local structure of memory.

Beyond demonstrating the subjective nature of memory and how it can stand in tension to larger historical events and a larger collective memory, Grass's novel engages with the concept of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (overcoming the past) and the relative silence in the decade following the Holocaust.<sup>186</sup> While both Grass and Stanišić counter a silence or lack of awareness of the Holocaust and Bosnian genocide respectively, it is necessary to complicate this connection. Oskar, as an unreliable narrator, bears witness to National Socialist crimes, yet it is also not clear whether or not he is complicit – Katharina Hall highlights, for example, the conflicting stories Oskar gives as to how his fathers died with one account suggesting Oskar as

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<sup>186</sup> Cf. Katharina Hall, "Günter Grass's 'Danzig Quintet,'" in *The Cambridge Companion to Günter Grass*, ed. Stuart Taberner (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 72, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521876704.006>.

guilty.<sup>187</sup> Aleksandar – and his friends Asija and Zoran – however are clearly still children and narrated with the viewpoint and naivety of a child (e.g., Aleksandar’s question on visa) and victims during the Bosnian war: Aleksandar flees as a refugee to Germany, and Asija is lost. So why does Stanišić introduce this intertextuality?

In Grass’s *Die Blechtrommel*, Amir Eshel recognizes a temporal play in the narration of the Kristallnacht that “forc[es] the reader to view two moments simultaneously” which results in a “depiction of the Nazi past [that] is also an assault on the present.”<sup>188</sup> Eshel argues that the temporality poses a challenge for “the reader to begin a new trajectory” that breaks with a pattern that led to the Second World War and the Holocaust.<sup>189</sup> While *Soldat* is largely narrated in the past and present too, the temporal scheme in individual episodes remains largely straightforward where events are clearly marked as in the past and do not infringe or burst into the narrative present. However, the narrative montage that introduces various narrators and points of view, interrupting the narrative present with past events – most notably with the insertion of the novel-within-a-novel “Als alles gut war” – has a similar effect whereby the reader is confronted with past events to contrast and compare with the narrative present. The intertextuality with Grass leads the reader to engage with the temporality of the text, reading it in relation to past, present, and future within a German and a global context.

## Open-ended Futures

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<sup>187</sup> Hall, 74.

<sup>188</sup> Eshel, *Futurity*, 41.

<sup>189</sup> Eshel, 41.

A play with temporality is more fully explored in *Herkunft*. As I argue in my analysis of the *Bildungsroman*, the seeds that are sewn in *Soldat* come to fruition in the later text *Herkunft*. The narrative in *Herkunft* is non-linear, defying the teleological bias of the *Bildungsroman* genre which Stanišić begins experimenting with in *Soldat*. Similar to my discussion of Herta Müller's montage poetics in *Reisende auf einem Bein* in Chapter One, the narrative montage of *Herkunft* follows a loose chronological timeline relating to the immigrant protagonist's attempt at to apply for German citizenship. Asked to write a ““handgeschriebenen Lebenslauf” [handwritten chronology of my life] for the *Ausländerbehörde* (Foreigners' Registration Office), the protagonist Stanišić begins to reflect on who he is and what makes up a “Lebenslauf” (H 6f.; WYCF 2), leading to a compilation of essayistic reflections, lists, narrative, and a *Choose-Your-Own-Adventure Story*. As Anna Rutka summarizes, *Herkunft* is a “hybrid, open and ambiguous narrative.”<sup>190</sup>

The ambiguity of form and eschewal of linearity is most evident in the final section of the text which I argue renders *Herkunft* a futural and open-ended text. The end of the text takes the form of a Choose-Your-Own-Adventure-Story, a genre typical of children's literature that the protagonist mentions he discovered as a child in 1991 at the beginning of *Herkunft* (H 12; WYCF 8). An interactive genre, the reader chooses how the story progresses, for example:

*Lügst du? Sagst du: » Ja, ich bin es. « Dann lies weiter auf Seite 352  
Sagst du die Wahrheit – »Ich bin es, Oma. Saša « – lies weiter auf Seite 305 (H 303)*

*Do you lie? If you say, “Yes, it's Pero,” turn to page 345  
If you tell her the truth – “It's me, Grandma. Saša” – turn to page 301 (WYCF 299)*

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<sup>190</sup> Anna Rutka, ““Herkunft ist Zufall”: Zu offenen Herkunfts- und Heimatkonzepten in der Literatur der Deutschen Postmigrantischen Generation,” *German Life and Letters* 75, no. 4 (2022): 554, <https://doi.org/10.1111/glal.12358>.



The Choose-Your-Own-Adventure genre is often fantastical, which Stanišić leans into with the title of the epilogue “Der Drachenhort” [Dragon’s Hoard] as well as references to sirens, a demon, and dragons. The sudden departure from the realistic into fantasy-tinged text unravels the seemingly established autobiographical nature of the text (e.g., empiric author, protagonist, and narrator sharing the same name). The multiple endings offered through this genre similarly subverts the reader’s expectations that are formed at the beginning of the book: *Herkunft* is framed as an exploratory text looking to answer the question of his origins that the protagonist poses, as indeed the title of the book itself indicates. In refusing to offer a typical ending by inserting the children’s playful genre, Stanišić leaves the question and text itself open, suggesting that there are many potential answers.

The reading experience becomes unique to each reader as the process is never closed off entirely since the reader can always go back to read what they might have “missed” in the alternative threads offered by the Choose-Your-Own-Adventure, leading to a loop-like reading practice. By choosing to end his text this way, Stanišić circumvents the “where are you from” question that is often posed to immigrants.<sup>191</sup> In this way, the author highlights that there is no simple answer to the question of origin, and that there are indeed many depending which narrative strand one follows and that all strands are somehow interconnected and equally truthful.

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<sup>191</sup> Ming-Bao Yue offers an in-depth analysis of the immigrant experience in Germany and this question although she specifically discusses racialized Europeans. Ming-Bao Yue, “On Not Looking German: Ethnicity, Diaspora and the Politics of Vision,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 3, no. 2 (May 1, 2000): 173–94, <https://doi.org/10.1177/136754940000300202>.

In an interview about the project “Berlin liest ein Buch” [Berlin reads a book] that selected *Herkunft* to read, Stanišić tells how he sometimes integrates moments in his works for the reader to bring their own backgrounds:

Hier ist eine Leerstelle, an der ich mich mit Erklärungen zurückhalte. Ich weiß also, dass die Leser sie selbst ausfüllen werden, mit ihren eigenen Lebens- und Leseerfahrungen. Und damit verändern sie das Buch, erzählen ihm eine ganz neue Dimension hinzu.

Here is a gap where I hold off. I know that, in this way, the reader will fill it out themselves, with their own life and reading experiences. And though this they change the book, bring a whole new dimension to it.<sup>192</sup>

Stanišić reminds the reader at the end of *Herkunft* that they are indeed simply reading a mediated, fictional account and thus bringing their own perspective to the story. Through the convention of the Choose-Your-Own-Adventure Story and its reader instructions, the narrator and implied author Stanišić addresses the reader directly, telling them how to read (i.e., not simply by page number) and that they are in charge: “Du entscheidest, wie die Geschichte weitergehen soll, du erschaffst dein eigenes Abenteuer” [H 301; You decide how the story should continue – you create your own adventure, WYCF 297]. The explicit reader interaction and the role of the reader in co-creating the narrative they are reading through the open-ended invitation to choose how to end the story is somewhat encapsulated in the English translation of the book’s title. Rather than a direct translation of the word “Herkunft,” the translators opted for “Where You Come From,” directly addressing the reader in the second person in the manner of the Choose-Your-Own-Adventure Story from the end of the text. The explicit reader interaction

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<sup>192</sup> Cornelia Geißler, “Saša Stanišić: Wieder fliehen junge Menschen, und die Väter bleiben zurück. Interview,” *Berliner Zeitung*, May 26, 2022, sec. Berlin, <https://www.berliner-zeitung.de/kultur-vergnuegen/literatur/gespraech-ueber-herkunft-deutscher-buchpreis-sasa-stanisic-berlin-liest-ein-buch-li.229858>. Translation my own.

is epitomized in the narrator-protagonist's instructions for the Choose-Your-Own-Adventure Story, when he declares "Du bist ich" [H 301; You are me, WYCF 297]. This play with the text's conclusion transcends typical (auto)biographical recollections of origins since it emphasizes the contemporaneous moment by encouraging explicit reader (inter)action.

The co-creation between reader, writer, and text that *Herkunft* shows also pertains to how memory is at work and negotiated in the text itself. The form of the text and rejection of a typical end leaves it open, an end that is always able to be (re)done and read in different ways. The contemporaneous moment is significant, and the present is emphasized. The narrator's recollections on his past function in a similar manner, where on reflection of past events in Bosnia such as the rise of ethno-nationalism the present flashes up e.g., Stanišić's mention of anti-immigrant sentiment and demonstrations in Chemnitz in the narrative present.

Stanišić's *Herkunft* and *Wie der Soldat das Grammofon repariert* work against a rigid European memory discourse that overlooks ethnic cleansing post-1989. Playing with genre and form, he reflects on the recent past and histories of violence to integrate more memories into a network of memory that remains open to the future. In his work, he avoids reinstating a similarly bounded system that is simply additive in its structure, instead emphasizing the contemporaneous and maintaining a future-oriented openness to matters of memory and text.

## Chapter 4: Connected Memory: Solidarity and Transcultural Reflections

### *Ein europäisches Abendmahl*

At the beginning of *Ein europäisches Abendmahl*, a multi-author performance piece written by Terézia Mora, Elfriede Jelinek, Nino Haratischwili, Sofi Oksanen, and Jenny Erpenbeck in 2017, renaissance lute music is playing with women carrying furniture across the stage and then disappearing again, never setting the furniture down, and muttering to themselves indiscernibly with the word “Europa” now and again audible.<sup>193</sup> Dirt piles stand at the back of the stage and the scenery depicts a ruined hall, in what is a clear reference to Leonardo da Vinci’s *The Last Supper*. This setting, along with the play’s title and its reference to evening, immediately conjures up the image of the ruins of a continent at dusk. This portentous imagery mirrors the contemporaneous narrative in 2017 in the media of Europe as a continent in decline, e.g., with the so-called migrant crisis at its peak in 2015, the rise of right-wing populism across the continent, culminating in the United Kingdom’s Brexit vote to leave the European Union in 2016.<sup>194</sup>

This sociopolitical landscape provides the backdrop for the five contemporary female European authors, who were invited by the Wiener Akademietheater and director Barbara Frey, to

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<sup>193</sup> I refer to the recording, which was taken of the performance on 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2017, although the premiere itself took place earlier on 27<sup>th</sup> January 2017. *Ein europäisches Abendmahl* (Burgtheater, Vienna, 2017).

<sup>194</sup> E.g., the anti-Islam, far-right Pegida movement as well as the nationalist, right-wing populist political party Alternative für Deutschland in Germany, Le Front National in France, Norbert Hofer of the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs first round win in the 2016 Austrian presidential election, and the increasing nationalist Euroscepticism in Viktor Orbán’s Hungary.

produce individual texts that reflect on the current state of Europe. Each author's contribution goes beyond sole recollections of histories of violence by exploring the implicit and explicit futural potential in the memories of totalitarian pasts. Oksanen deals with economic inequality – and thus is not a significant part of my analysis in this chapter –, Jelinek tackles European fascism, and Erpenbeck, Mora, and Haratschwili recall the continent's socialist past, lending the play a decidedly Eastern European focus. Through relating these pasts to contemporary political challenges, all five authors address, however, questions of European identity and unity, and the felt geographic imbalance between Eastern and Western European memory discourses, ultimately developing potential connective moments of solidarity.

The performance itself consists of four monologues and one dialogue, with most characters addressing the audience directly. Mora's protagonist Mari tells of no longer having to travel after she fled to an unnamed city in West Central Europe from an equally unnamed country in Eastern Europe. Similarly, Haratschwili's Marusja fled from the continent's East to Germany or Austria with her son. Her speech centers around her determined efforts to assimilate in her host country (*Gastland*), her work as a cleaner at a refugee center, and the hatred she has for migrants who came after her. Jelinek's thought experiment on Europe explores cultural frameworks for European identity, examining Europe's classical and biblical heritage and connecting them to the continent's fascist past. Oksanen's piece is the sole on-stage dialogue and explores the positions of Daria, a Ukrainian egg cell doner, and Mary, a middle-aged English woman who wishes to have a child. The women do not directly converse with one another but respond to the off-stage "babydreams" agent's questions about their past and current motivations. The final, very short text of *Ein europäisches Abendmahl* was written by Erpenbeck, whose "Frau im Bikini" [woman in a bikini] describes past travels and proclaims her fears of leaving her apartment.

With its allegorical reference to the Last Supper, the title of *Ein europäisches Abendmahl* signals futurity and hope as well as an end, since the biblical meal in Christian theology symbolizes a new beginning in terms of the ritual of the Eucharist and the eventual resurrection of Christ. The question of whether the continent is at dusk or dawn creates a constant friction throughout the theater text and in its reflections on European identity and the interaction of different memories. Although each author wrote a separate standalone text, the staging of the piece brings these texts into close dialogue with one another – through the interactions and indiscernible chattering at the start, through entering the stage at the end of the previous monologue and overlapping with the current speaker, and most prominently through the final image of the six women talking at a table together. The final “Abendmahl” that takes place at the end raises this question of a continent at dusk or dawn, recalling the play’s title once again.

### **Comparative Memory**

The issue remains highly topical in today’s Europe and renders the 2017 performance a particularly relevant text to examine, especially in light of contemporary debates on different histories of violence and how they are (un)able to interact or be examined in relation to one another, for example in what has become known as the “Historikerstreit 2.0” or the “causa Mbembe” in Germany.<sup>195</sup> Achille Mbembe, professor at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa, had been scheduled to deliver the key note address at the 2020 Ruhrtriennale but

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<sup>195</sup> For a defense of Mbembe see Michael Rothberg, “The Specters of Comparison,” Goethe Institut., May 2020, <https://www.goethe.de/prj/zei/en/pos/21864662.html>. On the general Mbembe affair see Astrid Erll and Jeffrey K. Olick’s helpful summary: Erll and Olick, “Memory Studies and the Future of Memory: A Conversation between Astrid Erll and Jeffrey K. Olick,” 259–62.

was later disinvited amid accusations of the relativization of the Holocaust and anti-Semitism in his work. In *Politiques de l'inimitié* [2016], the prominent Cameroonian historian and philosopher examines potential underlying conditions of racist systems of oppression, relating European colonialism, South African apartheid, and the Holocaust. In one of the frequently quoted passages of concern, Mbembe acknowledges the different contexts of these histories of violence and instead seeks to compare the conditions productively without equation.<sup>196</sup> However, in a second contested passage in “On Palestine,” he describes the occupation of Palestine as “the greatest act of cowardice in the past half century,” thereby introducing language of equation and hierarchical comparison.<sup>197</sup>

The theater text *Ein europäisches Abendmahl* itself navigates issues of comparison, examining the entanglements of National Socialism, global capitalism, and Eastern European state socialism. However, unlike the latter quote from Mbembe’s writing, I argue that *Ein europäisches Abendmahl* attempts what Michael Rothberg has labeled “differentiated solidarity,”<sup>198</sup> showcasing potential solidarities inherent in the post-socialist past as a way to conceive of a contemporary or future European identity. *Ein europäisches Abendmahl* engages with the socialist past as what Astrid Erll has called a “mnemonic resource,” a memory that can be useful in thinking through

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<sup>196</sup> In *Politiques de l'inimitié* [2016] Mbembe writes “Le système de l’apartheid en Afrique du Sud et, sur le mode paroxystique et dans un contexte distinct, la destruction des juifs d’Europe constituèrent deux manifestations emblématiques de ce fantasme de separation.” Achille Mbembe, *Politiques de l'inimitié* (Paris: la Découverte, 2018), 76.

<sup>197</sup> Achille Mbembe, “On Palestine,” in *Apartheid Israel: The Politics of an Analogy*, ed. Jon Soske and Sean Jacobs (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015), viii.

<sup>198</sup> Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2019), 124.

“present challenges and envision[ing] better future[s].”<sup>199</sup> Looking beyond the totalitarian regimes of state socialism, the performance piece instead focuses on citizens’ everyday realities, exploring the “past potentiality” of the socialist past.<sup>200</sup> I see the play as seeking to develop what Maja and Reuben Fowkes have described as “new forms of global solidarity” through the connective encounter between the five texts, the performance itself, and the audience.<sup>201</sup> This futural gesture towards trans-national solidarities, I argue, *is* a legacy of the socialist past itself and is what the play works towards. In my own reading of the play and its performance, I aim to talk of the individual texts in relation to one another and discuss them in a way that seeks to not relativize or enter the hierarchical logic of comparison.<sup>202</sup>

*Ein europäisches Abendmahl* explores debates regarding diverse histories of violence and their interactions in the context of the memory of former socialist states. The accompanying program frames the performance as a distinctly post-socialist one, indicating how questions of identity in terms of the East/West Cold War divide inform the play’s current negotiation of European identity.<sup>203</sup> Included in the program are short essayistic texts by three Austrian (Sandra Gugić, Gerhild Steinbuch, and Olga Flor) and one Croatian writer (Dubravka Ugrešić) that were written in the years prior to the performance. These supplementary texts serve as thematic anchors

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<sup>199</sup> Erll and Olick, “Memory Studies and the Future of Memory: A Conversation between Astrid Erll and Jeffrey K. Olick,” 264.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> Maja Fowkes and Reuben Fowkes, “Post-National in East European Art: From Socialist Internationalism to Transnational Communities,” in *Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe: A Critical Anthology.*, ed. Ana Janevski, Roxana Marcoci, and Ksenia Nouril (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2018), 232.

<sup>202</sup> I refer to “text” in its broadest sense, encompassing literary, performance, and visual material.

<sup>203</sup> Program for *Ein europäisches Abendmahl* at the Burgtheater (Vienna, 2017).



for the performance where the writers also contemplate what it means to be European, what Europe may stand for, and what is to become of Europe. In relation to these existential questions, Steinbuch, for example, provides a postapocalyptic vision of a European future to the play, asking: “Was wird einst von Europa bleiben? Nur Ruinen und Geschichten eines untergegangenen Kontinents?” [What will remain of what was formerly Europe? Only ruins and (hi)stories of a perished continent?].<sup>204</sup>

Parts of the text and its performance are contentious. Nino Haratischwili’s protagonist Marusja spews explicitly racist vitriol targeted at migrants in her monologue. Marusja, who works as a cleaner and migrated to West Central Europe, meticulously learned German words in order to assimilate – or to even surpass native speakers as she boasts (“Weiter als die Eingeborenen.” [Further than the natives]) – which she demonstrates to the audience by reciting unusually long compounds (e.g., “Zungenverknötungswörter” [tongue tie words] “Gleichgewichtsdichtegradientenzentrifugation” [Equilibrium density gradient centrifugation]).<sup>205</sup> She later accuses migrants who have come after her as “having it easier,” and enters exactly into the logic of competition, comparing her own experience of migration to those who came after in bad faith, echoing some of the language (e.g., “Affen” [monkeys], “Viecher” [creatures], and “wie Kakerlaken” [like cockroaches]) used to describe migrants in the media and right-wing circles.<sup>206</sup> In the 2017 Burg performance, as well as at a guest performance of the play that I attended in June 2017 at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin, the audiences reacted by laughing awkwardly or

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<sup>204</sup> Gerhild Steinbuch, “Vor Den Toren Europas,” in Program for *Ein Europäisches Abendmahl* at the Burgtheater (Vienna, 2017).

<sup>205</sup> All translations of *Ein europäisches Abendmahl* are my own.

<sup>206</sup> See for example then British Prime Minister David Cameron’s use of the word “swarm” to describe migrants at Calais traveling to the UK and its racist undertones in: Jessica Elgot, “How David Cameron’s Language on Refugees Has Provoked Anger,” *The Guardian*, January 27, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/jan/27/david-camerons-bunch-of-migrants-quip-is-latest-of-several-such-comments>.

uncomfortably. Confronting the audience with Marusja's diatribe, the play elicits discomfort, and holds up Marusja's conduct, I argue, as an example of unproductive comparison, a touchstone that Frey's staging ultimately seeks to counter through the stark contrast with the other monologues, particularly with Mora's protagonist Mari and her conversational monologue.

## **European Foundations**

As *Ein europäisches Abendmahl* is interested in foundations and beginnings, I turn now to the beginning of the play itself and analyze how it sets the stage for its own grappling reflection on European identity. The performance begins with an initial scurry of movement across the stage and barely audible whisperings of "Europa" and "Angst." Terézia Mora's protagonist, Mari, enters from stage right, dressed in blue and carrying a blue handbag, symbolically hinting towards the color of the European Union's flag.

While the play undoubtedly exhibits a general European focus and explores what that means in terms of unity, Mora's contribution to *Ein europäisches Abendmahl* actively works to decenter the prominence frequently bestowed upon Western Europe. She does so by broadening the perspective through stating that Europe is just one province in the world, and by destabilizing the idea of (Western) Europe as center through challenging its founding myths, such as those found in Greek mythology. Mari begins her monologue with an immediate address to the audience in a conversational tone:

Schön, dass ihr da seid. Dass ihr gekommen seid. Danke für die Zeit, die Selbstüberwindung, Kraftanstrengung und die Kosten, die euch entstanden sind. Ich weiß das zu schätzen. Ganz besonders, seitdem ich selbst kaum noch irgendwo hingehe.

Glad that you're here. That you made it. Thank you for your time, for forcing yourself to come, your effort and the costs you incurred. I know to appreciate this. Especially since I hardly go anywhere anymore myself.

Mari's direct address to the audience immediately recasts her monologue as a dialogue and draws attention to the communicative act that is taking place in the theater. It also leads the audience to question to whom Mari is indeed speaking, including who makes up the audience itself. By beginning Mari's monologue with these words, the futurity of Mora's contribution is made apparent since the conversation is intended to *do* something, to provoke reflection or contemplation about Europe and European unity, and to take the questions about to be thrown up by the performance into the empirical world and not just the fictional one on stage.

By referring to the material and real circumstances of money, time, and effort in the capitalist society in which the performance takes place, Mora draws attention to and expands the focus on the empirical world outside of the theater and the current constellation of Europe as made up of capitalist societies – as opposed to before the collapse of the alternative models under state socialism that had existed in Eastern Europe. With her effusive thanks, Mari's sarcastic reference to movement and traveling brings to mind the discourse on migration that dominated the continent in the mid 2010s and emphasizes the ease and privilege at which the contemporary audiences are able to travel – they have money and time to be able to come to the theater and to reflect on these questions rather than having to face the insecurity that refugees and migrants experience. Mari's final sentence in the quote above about herself no longer going anywhere also signals her own migration history to the audience, thereby underlining that she herself is no longer a refugee or migrant. She discusses her past in the latter part of her monologue, relating how she fled to West Central Europe from an unidentified place in Eastern Europe where “links die Kommunisten, [und] rechts die Katholiken” [on the left the communists, and on the right the Catholics] threatened her.

Mari's direct reference to her experience of violence in the former Eastern Bloc thus explicitly introduces post-socialist memory into the play and engages with it with a similar import to the other foundation stories that typically receive more attention in the overarching narrative of European history.

As indicated above, in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall a narrative of a “unified” European continent emerged that sought to teleologically explain the events of the “dark” twentieth century. And in a certain sense the continent was unified, or “desperately uniform” as Enzo Traverso has described, due to the establishment of neoliberalism.<sup>207</sup> Competing memory discourses, however, disrupt this uniformity as they show that different foundations for thinking about the future still existed. As many point out, the post-1989 discussions had been dominated by Western European memory;<sup>208</sup> a dominance that persists even after, according to Blacker and Etkind, a similar Eastern European “memory boom” took place after the collapse of state socialism.<sup>209</sup> While the Cold War divide and Stalinist crimes are recognized and form what Aleida Assmann names as one of the “Kernereignis[se]” [key events] of European memory, World War Two and the Holocaust — the other key event — have received significantly more attention in scholarship and (Western) European memory culture until more recently.<sup>210</sup> As Traverso writes in his introduction to *Left-Wing Melancholia*, “communism was reduced to its totalitarian dimension, which appeared as a collective, transmissible memory.”<sup>211</sup> This dominant representation of state

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<sup>207</sup> Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia*, 2.

<sup>208</sup> Rigney, “Ongoing: Changing Memory and the European Project.”

<sup>209</sup> Blacker and Etkind, “Introduction,” 4.

<sup>210</sup> Assmann, *Das neue Unbehagen an der Erinnerungskultur*, 155.

<sup>211</sup> Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia*, 2.

socialism does not, however, leave room for an engagement with the legacy of solidarity inherent in the post-socialist past since it merely consigns this legacy to obscurity.

As part of the Wiener Akademietheater's thought experiment, however, Mora attempts to highlight the hope inherent in Mari's memories to counter a narrative of complete failure in the socialist East. Part of her monologue thus stages both Mari's imagined (past) future and her actual future. She reminisces on her life and how she used to be more mobile when it was more difficult for her – when she had no passport, when she was illegally working in a country, and when it was unclear if she would be able to return. She relates her memories of the unnamed country in Eastern Europe, discussing her former hope of being able to travel:

Ich habe Außenhandel studiert, weil das der einzige Weg war, bei einer der 7 (in Worten: sieben) Firmen zu arbeiten, durch die man ins Ausland reisen konnte. Und dann habe ich doch bei keiner einzigen davon gearbeitet.

I studied foreign trade, because it was the only way to work at one of the 7 (literally seven) companies through which you were allowed to travel abroad. And then I didn't even work at a single one of them

Her former dream of working in one of the few companies that would enable her to travel abroad remained unfulfilled, yet through her speech Mari shows that she did not remain “trapped” so-to-speak and her aspiration did not simply remain a failed dream. Traveling represented being able to find something fundamentally different than the confined world of her socialist country, with the hope that capitalism would be a liberating system. Mora's protagonist demonstrates that the impetus of this hope – the prospect of difference – remained, since the text turns into a reflection on the various possibilities of what it means to be able to travel in the present.

The futural potential inherent in Mari's former dream resonates with the present dream of Hamid, a recent Syrian refugee to whom Mari's daughter was giving conversation lessons until

Mari herself agreed to take over. In his conversation with Mari, Hamid states “Dschabla liegt am Meer” [Jableh lies by the sea], describing his coastal hometown Jableh that also contains an apparent reference to Ingeborg Bachmann’s poem “Böhmen liegt am Meer” [Bohemia lies by the sea, 1964]. It is unlikely that Hamid himself is citing Bachmann’s canonical poem – since he is only just learning German in these conversation lessons –, but Mora as author cites the *idea* of Bohemia at the sea, an imaginative space and source of utopian hope. Indeed, the figure of the Bohemian as anti-conformist, artistic vagabond, and Bohemia as a source of revolutionary potential features in key communist texts.<sup>212</sup> Though the Syrian city is indeed coastal, Mora uses this intertextual citation to emphasize the undertones of hope that run throughout her text. The reminiscence on Mari’s previous unrealized dream of working with a firm to travel abroad resonates with Hamid’s hope of being able to work and live in West Central Europe.<sup>213</sup> A non-territorial solidarity emerges whereby the affective hope of Mari’s memory resonates with Hamid’s own present hope, connecting two histories of migration for the audience to contemplate and reflect on why the current refugees are treated differently (or perhaps not) from the histories of migration on the European continent itself.

### **Peripheries / Center**

The constellation of these two different migratory routes places Europe, in particular Central Europe, in the center and indeed leads Mari to later reflect on the world in terms of a dichotomy

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<sup>212</sup> See Traverso on the link between utopia and Bohemia in works of Marx, Courbet, Benjamin, and Trotsky, Traverso, 143–50.

<sup>213</sup> Like in Mari’s migration story, no specific country in Europe is ever mentioned.

between one center and multiple peripheries, by conceiving of the world as a body. She connects this stark Eurocentrism that is prevalent in the Western hemisphere and refutes it by taking its Greco-Roman foundations to task:

Die Welt hat keinen Nabel und auch kein Herz, sie hat nur Provinzen, aber Tatsache ist: Diese hier ist eine der helleren. „Europa ist hell“, das habe ich von Hamid übernommen.

The world has no navel and also no heart, it only has provinces, but the fact is this: this one here is one of the brighter ones. “Europe is bright”, that I adopted from Hamid.

In my translation, I have opted to render “hell” as bright” to draw out the play with light/dark symbolism in *Ein europäisches Abendmahl*, however there are multiple interpretations of “hell” as an adjective which are productive for my reading of the play. As Mari is quoting Hamid, who has little knowledge of German, there is a potential word play with its English homonym “hell” i.e., “Europe is hell.” There is admittedly little English in the play, yet she later quotes Hamid as also describing the United States as “hell”, thus establishing a connection to the English word and referencing the capitalist nation *par excellence*. If we can interpret “hell” as the English, I argue that Mari is once again touching on the disillusionment felt by the protagonists from the socialist East and their disappointed hopes for a capitalist lifestyle. The critique of capitalism is an undercurrent throughout and particularly present in Oksanen’s text later in the performance which grapples with the commodification of women’s bodies under a capitalist system. The play’s critical edge questions unbridled capitalism as another one of the foundations of contemporary Europe, while exploring the potentiality in the memory of the socialist past for other imaginations of European identity.

The accompanying program to the staging features this remarkable quote set in black text on a white background as its front page, framing the entire performance around a conversation on

the foundations and imaginations of European identity. The graphic design of the program draws out the bright/dark symbolism of the quote which is prevalent throughout the performance via the various textual references to the Enlightenment, Renaissance, and “dark 20<sup>th</sup> century” as well as the theatrical components (e.g., use of stage lighting and musical accompaniment) that tie the different parts of the performance together. Mari’s quotation of Hamid, “Europa ist hell,” and her description of Europe as one of the “helleren” provinces hints towards the Enlightenment foundations of Europe by indicating the importance given to light in these European “origins.” Mora specifically alludes to the European self-understanding as a continent that has emerged out of the “dark” Middle Ages into the “light,” whereby they respectively signify the opposition between ignorance versus knowledge and reason. The Renaissance and Enlightenment emphasis on light against dark is evoked in the texts themselves (particularly in Jelinek’s contribution) and played with markedly throughout the staging of the performance, seen in the dark Beckettian apocalyptic scenery that contrasts with the light from the “ceiling” of the hall.

Mora takes up the Enlightenment’s reception of the Greco-Roman classics and alludes to one particular foundation story in her own examination of Europe. The reference to the navel and the world recalls the story of the Greek god Zeus seeking the center of the earth. The myth tells how the Greek god determined the earth’s center by locating the point at which two eagles, which he had sent around the world, crossed. The ancient Greeks, therefore, considered Delphi to be the center of the world – or indeed the *omphalos*, the Greek word for navel – and marked it so with an omphalos stone in the city. Later in the play, Jelinek similarly engages with the classical Greek mythology (namely the story of Zeus and Europa) for her exploration of the imaginations of European identity. Mora’s own use of this origin myth takes it up as a metaphor for the world and



leads her into a reflection on the center/periphery dichotomy as well as the embodied experience of Europe itself.

Mora's negation of this classical Greek myth reflects her attempt to undo the perception of Europe as center. She alludes to the problem that European foundation myths were and still are facing, namely that the so-called "classics" are being co-opted by the far-right as justification for (white) European superiority.<sup>214</sup> Another interpretation of the adjective "hell", that is not as apparent in my English translation, indeed relates to race and European identity. Reading "Europa ist hell" as "Europe is *fair*" introduces an attention to race in *Ein europäisches Abendmahl*, foregrounding the usual implicit whiteness in normative definitions of European identity. However, this facet remains at the surface level and the play unfortunately does not actively engage with the issue of European color-blindness in terms of its racialized citizens, who are consistently conceived of as non-European and as a mere contemporary phenomenon on the continent.<sup>215</sup> Indeed, all protagonists are white and Hamid, the sole racialized non-European character (he is Syrian), does not appear on stage but is only quoted by Mari, again introducing race via an external Other who does not partake in the discussion on European identity.

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<sup>214</sup> For example, two Australian universities accepted \$30 million from right-wing foundations to finance "Western Civilization" curricula, as reported by the *Inside Higher Education* in 2019. Elizabeth Redden, "Controversy Over Western Civilization Funding in Australia," *Inside Higher Ed* (blog), August 13, 2019, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/08/13/university-queensland-signs-controversial-50-million-agreement-fund-undergraduate>.; Princeton scholar Dan-el Padilla Peralta's argues, therefore, for a reconceptualization of his field of classical studies that reevaluates the prominence ascribed to ancient Rome and Greece, as discussed in a recent New York Times feature Rachel Poser, "He Wants to Save Classics From Whiteness. Can the Field Survive?," *New York Times Magazine*, April 25, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/02/magazine/classics-greece-rome-whiteness.html>. See also the Classics Journal *Eidolon*'s collection of articles on Race & Classics. "Articles About Race & Classics," *Eidolon Classics Journal*, November 30, 2020, <https://eidolon.pub/articles-about-race-classics-ac4d81d0f0de>.

<sup>215</sup> Ethnic and racial diversity are little acknowledged in historical Europe. See Fatima El-Tayeb, "Germany and Europe: Negotiating Identity in a Multicultural Present," in *The Routledge Handbook of German Politics & Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 285–300.

While *Ein europäisches Abendmahl* is framed by post-socialist memories by the paratextual and contextual material – i.e., the program’s essays and the authors’ own biographies – and as I argue has a clear emphasis on the legacy of Eastern European state socialism, it does contain a claim to an examination of a pan-European identity in its very title and so this erasure of racialized Europeans is a shortcoming of the play. However, Mora’s contribution attempts to break down the idea of Europe as center and the resulting claim to superiority based on its classical and Enlightenment legacy by reframing Europe as merely one of many provinces. She contrasts this idea of European exceptionalism with the cruelty to migrants – whether they are from the socialist East pre-1989 or, as is the case today, from areas where there is armed conflict such as in Syria – that the continent has shown in the present and the past by describing it as not having a heart.

The supposed historical racial homogeneity of the continent (East and West) displaces Europe’s racialized citizens into an externalized Outside that has implications for the imaginations of European identity. This separation is enacted to create a narrative of what or who is (not) European, including who has access to a certain common history, according to Fatima El-Tayeb.<sup>216</sup> In her discussion of racialized Europeans and the Global South, El-Tayeb argues that a Eurocentric time-space model places the Global South in Europe’s past to uphold this narrative of “a racialized outside that eternally lags behind,” with the result that the Global South can “never shape Europe’s path.”<sup>217</sup> In her book *Undeutsch*, El-Tayeb defines this time-space model with the concept “evolutionäre Zeit” [*evolutionary time*] and reevaluates European history in the context of a post-

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<sup>216</sup> El-Tayeb, 287.

<sup>217</sup> El-Tayeb, 287.

colonial, post-fascist, and post-socialist continent.<sup>218</sup> *Evolutionäre Zeit*, according to El-Tayeb, works according to a logic where consistent progress in the West is measured against a temporally displaced racialized Outside that is never able to lead world historical developments and as such remains historically and presently on the margins.<sup>219</sup>

This time-space relational dynamic, I argue, occurs at a European level too. The aforementioned enlightenment trope of assigning dark and light signifiers maps onto a spatial understanding of Europe. The East is often signified as being in the past and thus dark, whereby the West brought the former “into the light” after the respective revolutions overcoming the various state socialist regimes. The East is temporally displaced in the West’s past and has an infinite status of “newcomer” – somewhat similar to the treatment of racialized migrants within the entire continent.<sup>220</sup> Indeed, one critic wrote of Haratischwili’s Marusja fleeing “from the East to the better half of Europe”, maintaining a hierarchical indexing of the West as superior.<sup>221</sup>

In Mora’s terms, Eastern Europe remains on the outside as a *province*. Although El-Tayeb does not seem to differentiate between being on the margins versus being on the outside, there *is* a difference since the latter entails an actual cut between an inside/outside. With regard to the memory of state socialism, post-socialist memory as foundation for a European identity rather

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<sup>218</sup> Fatima El-Tayeb, *Undeutsch: Die Konstruktion des Anderen in der postmigrantischen Gesellschaft* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2016).

<sup>219</sup> El-Tayeb writes „[Es] konstruiert sich eine Logik, in der konstanter westlicher Fortschritt gegen ein ewig hinterherhinkendes rassifiziertes Außen gemessen wird, ein Außen, das per definitionem nie Motor weltgeschichtlicher Entwicklung sein kann und so historisch und gegenwärtig marginal bleibt. ” El-Tayeb, 52.

<sup>220</sup> El-Tayeb also states that the “evolutionary time” model holds true to some extent for the case of Eastern Europe. El-Tayeb, 93.

<sup>221</sup> Anke Dür, “Hinter der Fassade Europas. Rezension,” *Spiegel Online*, January 28, 2017, <https://www.spiegel.de/kultur/gesellschaft/wien-akademietheater-ein-europaeisches-abendmahl-rezension-a-1132142.html>.

appears on the margins, as it is fundamentally different to the treatment of racialized Europeans across the whole continent who are consistently denied access to “European history” at all. Thus, it is an imbalance and hierarchical relationship – not a perceived cut – that exists between a dominant Western discourse and a marginal Eastern one. The East is consistently relegated to the past and in this way is denied any futural potential for (re)imagining European identity. Mora’s description of the world as a mere province thus addresses this imbalance and relegation by relativizing the dominance of (Western) Europe.

## **Post-Fascist Europe**

In her contribution to *Ein europäisches Abendmahl*, Elfriede Jelinek connects Mora’s post-socialist exploration of European origin stories and traditions with a post-fascist one, by explicitly linking Greek mythology and the 2010s migration crisis with the Second World War and the Holocaust – the other defining European memory or what Claus Leggewie calls “eine Art negativer Gründungsmythos Europas” [a sort of negative foundation myth of Europe].<sup>222</sup> Directly following Mora’s scene, Jelinek provides her thought experiment on Europe in a monologue by “die Frau aus Österreich” [the woman from Austria]. Using her typical form of a *Textfläche*, Jelinek’s contribution focuses on the nuances of language and the potential hypocrisies within discourse.<sup>223</sup> In this typical Jelinekian form of the *Textfläche*, she weaves and confronts numerous quotes, references, and idioms into a montage that the characters on stage voice. She takes up

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<sup>222</sup> Leggewie, “Die Grenzen Der Nationalkultur,” 749. See also Blacker and Etkind, “Introduction.”

<sup>223</sup> On Jelinek’s theater texts as “Flächen” see: Evelyn Deutsch-Schreiner and Alexandra Millner, “Wann Ist Ein Text Theatertext? Über Flächen, Rhizome Und Die Grenzen Wissenschaftlicher Beschreibungskategorie,” in “*Postdramatik*”: *Reflexion Und Revision*, ed. Pia Janke and Teresa Kovacs (Vienna: Praesens Verlag, 2015), 77–86.

commonplace figures of speech and sayings to hint at something that is the opposite of the everyday.

Germany. Wir bringen Sie gern von A nach B, denn wer A sagt, muss auch B sagen, zum Glück, sonst bleiben Sie alle hier. Wir transportieren Sie, wir müden Fährmänner, ja, wir sind selbst schon müde vom Kleidersortieren und Kochen

Germany. We'll gladly bring you from A to B, since whoever says A, has to also say B, fortunately, otherwise you'll all remain here. We'll transport you, we tired ferrymen, yes, we ourselves already tired from sorting clothes and cooking

Jelinek alludes to the Holocaust indirectly through using “ordinary” German words that in combination reveal this unmistakable reference. For example, “transportieren” and “Kleidersortieren” recalls so-called “Lagersprache” [language of the camps], where words held an oftentimes sinister, and vastly different, meaning to their commonplace ones. The link to the Holocaust is made clearer shortly after the above quote, when the “woman from Austria” threatens “sonst kommen wir mit dem Gas der Tränen” [otherwise we'll come with the gas of tears]. Jelinek underscores this element of her text in her adaptation of the phrase “wer A sagt, muss auch B sagen” to “wir bringen Sie gern von A nach B.” Her reworking is suggestive of the continent's long history of migration, and in particular the history of forced relocations during the Second World War. It reminds the audience that Germany itself moved populations from “A to B,” or indeed, due to the surrounding allusions to the Holocaust in the text, to concentration camps such as Auschwitz-Birkenau itself.

Jelinek furthermore underlines the hypocrisy and insincerity of such banal language by utilizing stock phrases from customer service. The adverb “gern” renders the triteness of the phrase almost a slogan for a hypothetical travel company, or perhaps even a Deutsche Bahn

announcement.<sup>224</sup> Thus, similar to Mora's Mari, the woman from Austria perversely contrasts the ease of travel for some with the struggles of refugees – the preceding sentences directly refer to the 2015 migration crisis by quoting the far-right language used to describe the refugees (e.g., “diesen würdelosen Massen, die sich nicht waschen” [these unworthy masses, who don't wash]).<sup>225</sup>

Comparable to the affirmative tone of then Chancellor Angela Merkel's oft-quoted assertion “Wir schaffen das,”<sup>226</sup> Jelinek's use of the adjective “gern” is suggestive of the problems that arose during the 2010s European refugee and migrant crisis with regard to the Dublin Regulation.<sup>227</sup> Later in the text, she even indirectly refers to the former German Chancellor as “einer weisen Frau, die Werte setzt wie Grenzsteine” [a wise woman who sets values like one places boundary stones]. Jelinek thus hints towards the willingness of Germany (“gern”) in opposition to the unwillingness of many former socialist states, such as the Visegrád Group (an alliance between the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and Poland) who opposed a long-term quota system. The Czech State Secretary of European Affairs Tomáš Prouza, for example, explained the Czech Republic's decision to contest quotas by saying “we cannot treat them [refugees] as you treat cattle, and push them around from here to there.”<sup>228</sup> The discord among European Union members in relation to

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<sup>224</sup> The theme of traveling by train runs throughout Jelinek's text: “Wir hier sind nur die Haltestelle davor, immer grade nur eine Haltestelle davor” [We here are just the stop before, always only just a stop before].

<sup>225</sup> Similarly, later in Jelinek's contribution: “da kommen jetzt so viele Rassen” [all these races now coming there].

<sup>226</sup> Angela Merkel's statement “Wir schaffen das” came to stand for Germany's open border immigration policy. The phrase came from a speech the Chancellor gave in a Federal Press Conference (Bundespressekonferenz) on August 31, 2015, after recently visiting a refugee camp near Dresden. Angela Merkel, “Sommerpressekonferenz von Bundeskanzlerin Merkel” (Berlin, 2015), <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/pressekonferenzen/sommerpressekonferenz-von-bundeskanzlerin-merkel-848300>.

<sup>227</sup> The Dublin Regulation is an EU law that stipulates which country is responsible for an applicant's asylum claim, and according to which asylum seekers are transferred to a “Dublin country” (i.e., a country that abides by the Dublin Regulation).

<sup>228</sup> Prouza: “Kvóty jsou nefér vůči uprchlíkům, nemůžeme s nimi zacházet jako s dobyt看em a šoupat s nimi sem a tam.” “Nemůžeme s uprchlíky šoupat jako s dobyt看em, odmítla vláda znovu kvóty,” *Novinky.cz*, September 9,

where refugees make their applications seeking asylum consequently resulted in a quota system, and revealed the cracks in the union – resulting in the apprehension that the European Union was at dusk. Jelinek indirectly alludes to the contemporary disunity of the EU in the face of the refugee crisis and connects it to other shared histories and memories.

Jelinek takes up language such as Prouza's in her text and in her typical meandering style interweaves a variety of intertextual references with constantly recurring themes and images. She highlights the language used to describe refugees and migrants whereby the latter are often disparagingly compared with animals – something to which Prouza also alludes in his justification of the Czech Republic not receiving migrants and which Nino Haratischwili in her contribution puts in the mouth of her protagonist Marusja as mentioned above. Like Mora's scene, Jelinek connects this language to European origin myths:

Was wollen Sie mit dem blöden Stier? der darf hier nicht einsteigen, hier ist nur für Menschen, wir sind doch kein Viehtransporter, auch wenn wir Menschen genauso behandeln wie die Tiere, wir machen da keinen Unterschied, alles, was lebt und ein Bewusstsein hat, sollte jetzt zur Vernunft zurückkehren und nicht so drängeln, sonst kommen wir mit dem Gas der Tränen, der Würze des Pfeffers und dem Elektrostab.

What do you want with this stupid bull? It is not allowed to get in here, here it's only for people, we're not a cattle carrier after all, even if we treat people exactly the same as the animals, we don't draw a distinction there, everything, that is living and has a consciousness, should return now to reason and not swarm, otherwise we'll come with the gas of tears, the zest of pepper, and the electric prod

Through the binarism of people/animals, Jelinek alludes to the Holocaust, Ancient Greece, and the Enlightenment roots of thought in Europe. Specifically, she cites the animal imagery ascribed to migrants and relates it to other instances of animal and human interaction in European (hi)story.

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2015, <https://www.novinky.cz/clanek/domaci-nemuzeme-s-uprchliky-soupat-jako-s-dobytkem-odmitla-vlada-znovu-kvoty-325143>.

At the beginning of the above excerpt, for example, Jelinek first mentions a bull – a reference to Zeus – a thread, which she picks up and expands upon again later in her text through the explicit reference to the Greek god hiding as a white bull in a herd of cattle in order to abduct Europa. Jelinek thus highlights that the “Rape of Europa” – as a foundational story *par excellence* – is not only a narrative of the continent’s naming but also one of migration and violence.

A second layer that Jelinek weaves into her contribution brings Enlightenment thought into the text through referring to “Vernunft” [reason] and the continent’s humanist foundations. Jelinek’s woman from Austria’s call to reason in the above excerpt echoes the Enlightenment one whereby *both* contest religious dogma and superstition in favor of reason. However, there is an ironic nudging in Jelinek’s text. Through bringing together the various foundation stories into one “knot,” she aims to make clear the absurdity of the Enlightenment reception of the Classics and the subsequent reception of the Enlightenment itself as a teleological process of an ever-improving Europe.

This thread of violent reason is already anticipated earlier in her *Textfläche* in the expression “denn wer A sagt, muss auch B sagen,” since the logic of the phrase implies that if something is begun it must be completed even if difficulties arise. Together with the consistent references to the Holocaust (e.g., “Gas der Tränen”), the insistence on reason and logic puts histories of violence into conversation with the continent’s Enlightenment foundations. Jelinek in this way makes use of the banality of “denn wer A sagt, muss auch B sagen” to remind the audience that these “migrations” of European Jews were planned in National Socialist Germany and that there is a long history of (forced) migration and displacement on the continent itself. She makes this connection all the more explicit through contrasting humans with animals: “hier ist nur für Menschen, wir sind doch kein Viehtransporter” [it’s only for people here, we are not a cattle carrier



after all], a common theme in survivor accounts of their transport to camps.<sup>229</sup> Through this sardonic allusion to the use of animal wagons to transport Jews to concentration camps, Jelinek constructs a trajectory from the Enlightenment to the Holocaust and beyond to the 2015 European migrant crisis in order to critically question modernity's supposed humanism.

Reminiscent of Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* [1947], she questions modernity's instrumental rationality and the assumed continuation of teleological progress since 1945 and hints at the ensuing erosion of subjectivity since she leaves her protagonist nameless – she is simply referred to as “die Frau aus Österreich.”<sup>230</sup> Frey picks up on this empty mouthpiece and chooses to have two actors play “die Frau aus Österreich” thus giving the character an almost archetypal like quality. In doing so, Frey similarly alludes to the Enlightenment call to humanism to emphasize the discrepancy between the continent's theoretical or philosophical traditions and its actual practices.

## Western Canon

As a whole piece, *Ein europäisches Abendmahl* also seeks to integrate post-socialist memory into the dominant Western discourse through engaging with its (predominantly Western) canonical

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<sup>229</sup> The use of animal wagons to transport Jews during the Holocaust is a frequent theme in many survivor accounts. E.g., in her testimony *weiter leben (Eine Jugend)*, Ruth Klüger reflects on the name for the train cars in which she was transported to Auschwitz: “Das Problem war gar nicht, daß Viehwaggons von vornherein keine Personenzüge sind.” Ruth Klüger, *Weiter leben: eine Jugend* (München: dtv, 1994), 108.

<sup>230</sup> Olga Flor's text in the performance's program similarly questions this narrative of “eine irgendwie naturgegebene Entwicklung [...], die sich von der Aufklärung bis heute – mit apokalyptischen Zwischenstationen, zugegeben – immer weiter entrollte” [a somehow inevitable development ... that uncoiled itself ever further from the Enlightenment to today, admittedly with apocalyptic stops on the way]. Ultimately, she declares such an understanding as naïve and “unsäglich” [unspeakable]. Olga Flor, “Müdigkeit,” in Program for *Ein Europäisches Abendmahl* at the Burgtheater (Vienna, 2017).

aesthetic works. The constellation of individual contributions and Frey's staging itself negotiate Europe's past through theater as a medium as well as through the multiple intertextual and visual references to European artistic and literary traditions. In terms of the stage setting, the first reference to strike the audience is an overt allusion to Da Vinci, yet on closer look the set design holds another visual connection to Samuel Beckett and specifically his 1961 play *Happy Days*. As a key figure of literary history and theatrical developments in the twentieth century, Beckett serves as an important intertext for this postdramatic text and its staging. Not adhering to Aristotelian dramatic structure and depicting a bounded world with a logically unfolding plot, *Ein europäisches Abendmahl* as a postdramatic text opens up an imaginative space for the audience, actors, directors, set designers to grapple with questions, rather than offering neatly prepared answers.<sup>231</sup>

At a first glance of the 2017 performance, the piles of dirt, or perhaps ash, scattered across the stage conjure a postapocalyptic image that recalls the mound in which Beckett's protagonist Winnie is buried – a reference that is made even clearer in Frey's staging of Jelinek's contribution where two women suddenly appear at the beginning of the scene from the mound and begin a conversation still buried to their torsos. In Beckett's *Happy Days*, Winnie sinks down to her neck in the second act, demonstrating the passing of time and alluding to death through the eventual moment of burial. The new mise-en-scène and the overall post-apocalyptic setting also hints at the decaying of European traditions, which is accentuated by Winnie's failed attempts to quote from the canon of European literature (e.g., the Bible, Milton, Shakespeare, Dante), often framing the

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<sup>231</sup> A postdramatic text, according to Hans-Thies Lehmann, conceives of the theater as a whole – stage *and* audience –, recognizing the simultaneity of the “emission and reception of signs and signals” as a significant element of the genesis of a production. Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theater*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby (London: Routledge, 2006), 17.

incomplete quotes by drawing attention to her failing memory: “what are those wonderful lines.”<sup>232</sup> One prominent moment of intertextuality is Winnie’s truncated rendering of Ophelia’s soliloquy “O, woe is me/T’ have seen what I have seen, see what I see!” (*Hamlet*. 3.1) as “what are those wonderful lines – (*wipes one eye*) - woe woe is me – (*wipes the other*) – to see what I see.”<sup>233</sup> The gaps between Winnie’s lines are accentuated by wiping her eyes, which gesturally draws attention to her body, emphasizing that rather than the grand literary reference, the body and the quotidian are stressed in *Happy Days*.

The 2017 staging of *Ein europäisches Abendmahl* cites Beckett and thereby Western theatrical tradition to establish an important horizon for the interpretation of the thematical threads – namely European foundation stories. However, the contemporary play stands in contrast to the dismal outlook in the Beckettian model and Winnie’s engagement with the destroyed traditions of European humanism. Unlike Beckett’s Winnie, the women in the staging of Jelinek’s text slowly *emerge* from – rather than sink into – the dirt piles throughout the course of the scene and eventually climb out of the debris. The visual inversion of Beckett’s setting in Frey’s staging instead hints at a more optimistic and hopeful outlook that is also latent in the text, challenging an initial assumption of pessimism that one draws on first sight.

In the reception of *Ein europäisches Abendmahl*, theater critics focused on Martin Zehetgruber’s set build, interpreting the performance as depicting the decline of Europe.<sup>234</sup> The reviews of the performance were largely negative, with some seeing the piece broken into

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<sup>232</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Happy Days* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), 7.

<sup>233</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. G. R. Hibbard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).; Beckett, *Happy Days*, 7.

<sup>234</sup> E.g., Dürr, “Wien Akademietheater.”

distinctly separate “Momentaufnahmen.”<sup>235</sup> Others, however, such as Norbert Mayer in *Die Presse* and Johannes Siegmund in *Nachtkritik*, highlighted moments of optimism alongside pessimism.<sup>236</sup>

Margarete Affenzeller in *Der Standard* welcomed the female voices that the piece offered as a response to a canon that is “saturated with male viewpoints and interests.”<sup>237</sup> Indeed, the postdramatic performance explores (new) beginnings and questions pertaining to Europe’s present and future through exclusively female perspectives from several cultural traditions. The German-language production, highlighting something inherent in the text itself, reflects on a European canon critically, actively centering female voices in relation to this canon of art and theater that has been dominated by male perspectives – and indeed by Western Europeans.

## Female Perspectives

Similar to its Beckettian precedent and his use of everyday language and daily rituals (e.g., brushing teeth) in *Happy Days*, *Ein europäisches Abendmahl* takes a conversational tone, emphasizing the quotidian as a counter to the “grand men of history” and their narratives that hover in the background behind these monologues, i.e., through the visual and textual references to Zeus,

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<sup>235</sup> Dürr.

<sup>236</sup> Norbert Mayer, “Das dekadente Europa tafelt im Verfall,” *Die Presse*, January 28, 2017, <https://www.diepresse.com/5161445/das-dekadente-europa-tafelt-im-verfall>; Johannes Siegmund, “Die Vagina-Monologe: das Finale,” *nachtkritik.de* (blog), January 27, 2017, [https://nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=13549:ein-europaeisches-abendmahl-erpenbeck-haratischwili-oksanen-jelinek-mora-barbara-frey-burgtheater-wien&catid=38:die-nachtkritik-k&Itemid=40](https://nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=13549:ein-europaeisches-abendmahl-erpenbeck-haratischwili-oksanen-jelinek-mora-barbara-frey-burgtheater-wien&catid=38:die-nachtkritik-k&Itemid=40).

<sup>237</sup> Margarete Affenzeller, “Ein Europäisches Abendmahl’: Rückzug Und Resignation,” *Der Standard*, January 29, 2017, <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000051711187/ein-europaeisches-abendmahlrueckzug-und-resignation-in-europa>.

Da Vinci, Goethe, Beckett, Bismarck, and Hitler: Jenny Erpenbeck's protagonist, woman in a bikini, highlights this shift most explicitly:

Der Krieg muss *geführt* werden, hieß es doch immer.  
Krieg *führen*, Krieg *führen*.  
Ich hab davon ja wirklich keine Ahnung.  
Weiß jemand von Ihnen, wie das geht?  
(*Stille.*)  
Also: wie man *führt*?  
(*Stille.*)  
Kein Führer?  
(*Stille*)  
Keine Führerin?

[War has to be *waged*, so it's always said.  
*Wage* war, *wage* war.  
I really have no clue about it.  
Does one of you know, how it works?  
(*Silence.*)  
Well: how one *leads*?  
(*Silence.*)  
No male leader?  
(*Silence.*)  
No female leader?]<sup>238</sup>

In her anxious monologue, the woman in a bikini highlights the female focus in her play with the German verb *führen*. After contemplating the verb with its collocation *Krieg* [war], she distances herself from war and from leading. Saying she knows nothing about it, she alludes to war as dominated by men and quotes Bismarck a few lines later to emphasize this. Furthermore, the woman in a bikini connects *führen* to its derivative noun *Führer*, overtly calling the Second World War to mind due to the word's close association with Adolf Hitler. Nevertheless, Erpenbeck

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<sup>238</sup> I have inelegantly rendered the German verb *führen* as both *to wage* and *to lead* in my translation of the above passage. I keep the idiom "to wage war" but translate the fourth use of *führen* as "leads" in an attempt to replicate the connection that Erpenbeck is drawing out between the verb *führen* and the derivative noun *Führer*.

indicates distance and moves away from the National Socialist history by using the negative article “kein.” She goes one step further after a pause, using the female equivalent that is less common: *Führerin*. Through the additional suffix *-in*, this performative utterance simultaneously alludes to the lack of women in narratives of the past – since Erpenbeck retains the negative article (i.e., there are not many female leaders) – while also establishing the female horizon of the play. To be clear, I am not claiming that Erpenbeck is suggesting that women lead wars. Rather, she creates a tension with the usual male form of the noun *Führer* to challenge and negotiate space for the female direction of *Ein europäisches Abendmahl* where female experiences are shown to be constitutive to the formation of European identity.

The theatrical piece specifically centers the memory of female socialist realities, situating them as equally contributive to the formation of a transnational European identity and as a counter to the focus on secret police, violence, and male-coded stories of the socialist past. Through instead offering a futural take on the socialist past and its legacy, the piece highlights these memories as an equally valid part of the groundwork of building a post-1989 European identity and a sense of European community. The women tell their stories in a minimalist production, reflecting on their past and sharing vulnerabilities – Erpenbeck’s woman in a bikini expresses her agoraphobia, Mora’s Mari her former dreams, Haratischwili’s cleaner Marusja her anger. The women’s stories generate a point of non-territorial solidarity through their shared sense of affective vulnerability that is grounded specifically in the memory of the socialist past.<sup>239</sup>

Though an appeal to the universality of vulnerability runs the risk of essentializing and overlooking difference, *Ein europäisches Abendmahl* attempts to demonstrate through its

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<sup>239</sup> On feminist work on vulnerability see for example: Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London ; New York: Verso, 2006); Marianne Hirsch, “Vulnerable Times,” in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, ed. Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 76–96.

transcultural lens the heterogeneity of post-socialist memories. In a discussion of vulnerability and aesthetic works, Marianne Hirsch argues that “aesthetic encounters” are able to “elicit a sense of vulnerability that can move [the audience] toward an ethics and politics of open-endedness and mobility, attuning us to the needs of the present, to the potentialities for change, and to the future.”<sup>240</sup> The vulnerabilities elicited in and through *Ein europäisches Abendmahl* – of the *dramatis personae* and of the audience themselves –, are an attempt to transcend a pessimistic diagnosis of the continent in ruins, and instead cultivate a connective engagement or non-territorial solidarity as a basis for imagining a European identity.

On a surface level, the texts as well as the Burg Theater’s performance in 2017 appear to be mired in the “wreckage upon wreckage” of history, as Walter Benjamin describes the past in his ninth thesis of “On the Concept of History” [1942].<sup>241</sup> Indeed, as discussed above, Jelinek’s protagonists are literally buried at the beginning of their scene in dirt or ash piles that figuratively represent the past, and from the context of her text specifically signify the Second World War and the Holocaust.<sup>242</sup> However, each standalone contribution, by virtue of being combined into one theatrical text, conveys a message that signals an attempt at reaching unity, or rather a transnational solidarity through creating dialogue between the multiple female perspectives. The overall staging of the piece, moreover, reveals a futural perspective, one that is not mired in the past. In its staging, the women repeatedly emerge from the dark corners or sides of the stage, walking to the front to address the audience and deliver monologues about their lives. The set design of the

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<sup>240</sup> Hirsch, “Vulnerable Times,” 82.

<sup>241</sup> Hirsch, “Vulnerable Times,” 82.

<sup>242</sup> E.g., Jelinek alludes to the Holocaust indirectly through using “ordinary” German words that in combination reveal this unmistakable reference “transportieren” and “Kleidersortieren” recalls so-called “Lagersprache” [language of the camps].

Last Supper in ruins allegorically signals a breaking in favor of a future-oriented identity formation that acknowledges this past while also creating space for other realities as equally important for Europe.

In other words, the play has its metaphorical back turned towards the past, in favor of facing the future in an attempt to avoid acting like Benjamin's *Angelus Novus*, staring frozen and wide-eyed at past events on the continent. Erpenbeck's woman in a bikini, for example, lists her past travels through Venice and Paris, which symbolically stand for a particular image of a "grand" classical Europe. The cities' houses "topple" down, leading the woman in a bikini to conclude that "die waren gar keine Häuser, / hab ich gesehen, / nur so Fassaden" [they were not houses at all, / I saw, / only these facades]. The description of these two cities in relation to the visual of the ruins of the building of the Last Supper suggests that taking this "grandness" of past European centers as foundational for European identity is insubstantial and does not hold up to scrutiny. Indeed, she insinuates the heaviness of this imagination of European identity, explaining how it was difficult to walk there due to the lack of light: "Eigentlich gar kein Licht. Mehr so wie / Dunkelheit. / Ich wollte fort" [Actually no light at all. More like / Darkness. / I wanted to get away]. The flowing enjambement of "darkness" mirrors the sentiment of the woman in a bikini wanting to get away and highlights her movement away from the past.

This futural impetus of the woman in a bikini's speech is seen most poignantly at the end of this fourth vignette, where she proclaims: "Aber ich bin da durch / Und bin, endlich, in Berlin angekommen! / Berlin!" [I've been through it / And have, finally, arrived in Berlin! / Berlin!]. Interestingly, her final destination is not the classical Vienna, Rome, or Prague for example, but Berlin. As a quasi-melting pot of European history, Berlin represents the negotiations between the two dominant ideologies of the twentieth century on the continent.



## Multidirectional Resonances

The light/dark imagery of Frey's staging picks up on these threads in Erpenbeck's text. The stage lighting, for example, not only alludes to the classical Enlightenment ideals, but also to the so-called "dark twentieth century," where the collective violence of two World Wars and the Cold War is signified as dark. The light, on the other hand, serves an allegory for Europe's remembrance and its way of "dealing" (*Aufarbeitung*) with the past. The resulting post-1989 "memory boom" itself echoes the enlightenment prejudice of linearity and teleological progress through its logic,<sup>243</sup> since, as Goldfarb explains, the politics of collective memory works with the assumption that "remembering will set us free."<sup>244</sup> However, the typical symbolism of the darkness of forgetting versus the light of remembering and its resulting narrative, I argue, oversimplifies the continent's shared history and memory, as the play shows. Moreover, it obfuscates that despite "overcoming" the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century not all conflict on the continent was resolved – for example, the Troubles in Northern Ireland lasted until the late 1990s, the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia began only after the so-called peace that came with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, as well as the contemporary war in Ukraine. The assumed teleological transition from violence to a collective memory of it neatly parcels up events and does not look at the untidy overlapping and remaining problems, such as the long history of European discord, migration, and its complications.

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<sup>243</sup> On the post-1989 "memory boom" see Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 5.

<sup>244</sup> Jeffrey Goldfarb, Anna Lisa Tota, and Trever Hagen, "Against Memory," in *Routledge International Handbook of Memory Studies* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2015), 54.

*Ein europäisches Abendmahl* avoids this pitfall, however, through the combination of transcultural texts that attempt to evoke a shared history and memory as a foundation for mutual discussion that can lead to a nuanced unity. Mora's text, particularly in Mari's reflection on her past in the unnamed socialist country, refuses to remain in the logic of competitive memory in its insistence on its own futurity as a productive way to work towards unity in Europe. Anne Rigney has argued "an increasingly dominant discourse links European identity and integration precisely to an ability to deal with divisive and troublesome pasts for the sake of a better future" (2014, 246). In bringing these histories into conversation with one another in the theater, without equating them, *Ein europäisches Abendmahl* attempts to negotiate the center/periphery of *evolutionary time* models, yet it does not insist on "dealing" with the pasts in a way that seeks to overcome them. Instead, through the emphasis on the future potential of memory the heterogeneous memories touch one another and create resonances or "transnational connectivities" as Andreas Huyssen has called them in his call to connect memory politics to human rights.<sup>245</sup> Thus, the work the play does in terms of memory is a *negotiation* (rather than a "dealing") that remains open and unlimited.

In *Ein europäisches Abendmahl*, the five authors ultimately create multidirectional resonances between multiple memories – those of state socialism, the Holocaust, and of the more recent migrant crisis – to provoke the audience into deliberating how these different histories are able to interact with one another. The multidirectional model of memory, coined by Michael Rothberg, tries to conceive these relations in a way that does not reproduce structures of hierarchy where one history of suffering is claimed as more important than the other. Instead, according to Rothberg, a "malleable discursive space" can be opened up,<sup>246</sup> which is, I claim, precisely what

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<sup>245</sup> Andreas Huyssen et al., "Human Rights and German Intellectual History in Transnational Perspective," *The German Quarterly* 93, no. 3 (2020): 410, <https://doi.org/10.1111/gequ.12147>.

<sup>246</sup> Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, 5.

*Ein europäisches Abendmahl* strives to be as a performance piece. This postdramatic piece focuses on its ability to provoke thought and questions beyond the theater and its potential to lead to a change in world perspective. As such, the multi-author play does not aim to translate bounded textual worlds onto the stage with a logically unfolding plot – the text only takes on its futural gesturing and potential in its actual staging – but rather aims for such an open “malleable discursive space” that Rothberg describes.<sup>247</sup> In this space, various memories, histories, and traditions “touch” in the theatrical space to reflect on questions of European unity without claims of superiority.

The post-socialist memories of Mora’s protagonist Mari serve an expository purpose that frame the following scenes by establishing the context of post-socialist Europe. Mari’s monologue and discussion of her previous ambitions imbue the theater text with a futurity through establishing a productive connection between her own experience of state socialism and the contemporaneous situation of the migrant crisis. Her post-socialist memories remind us that there were also discord and problems in the past, yet the futural possibility inherent in post-socialist solidarities can provide a base for a European unity. The staging, as well as the text itself, insists on this futurity and its “past potentiality” that does not remain in the past, in the so-called ruins of Europe.<sup>248</sup> It presents the futural gesture inherent in post-socialism and Eastern Europe as integral to, and as an active part of, present-day Europe as a continent. It shows Europe is not only unified in name but also in its attempt to negotiate both its post-fascist and post-socialist past. The play therefore creates several nodal points where these discourses come together and touch on an equal level – post-socialism meets post-colonialism meets post-fascism. It shows how these elements contribute

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<sup>247</sup> Rothberg, 5.

<sup>248</sup> On “past potentiality” see Erll and Olick, “Memory Studies and the Future of Memory: A Conversation between Astrid Erll and Jeffrey K. Olick,” 264.

to what Europe is and it tries to escape the linear Judeo-Christian origin story born from the Enlightenment by exposing or revealing these touching points. The play indicates how multidirectional Europe is and attempts to work towards an imagination of European unity that understands itself as inherently heterogenous and multidirectional in its origins, identity, and contemporary challenges and tries to rub against the grain of the *evolutionary time* paradigm.

This text challenges the narrative of Eastern Europe as behind and “catching up” with the West by emphasizing the potential of non-territorial solidarities as a legacy of state socialism that can be productive for an entire European engagement with its identity. Through its emphasis on futurity and trans-national solidarity, the performance piece is distinctly post-socialist in its challenge to a narrative that is dominated by failure. *Ein europäisches Abendmahl* suggests alternative measures of progression are needed – i.e., not in terms of a failure of the former states but in terms of the potential in memory for resonances with contemporary issues.

Through her reference to Da Vinci’s famous mural, director Frey highlights the play’s insistence on its contemporaneity as a way of keeping its work and memory open and unbounded. While *Ein europäisches Abendmahl* in this allegorical reference to the Last Supper depicts an end (“Last”), the biblical meal in Christian theology also symbolizes a new beginning in terms of the ritual of the Eucharist and the eventual resurrection of Christ. It thus signals futurity since the repetition of the ritual of the Eucharist entails a futural perspective. It is not only an act rooted in remembrance, but in each repetition the practice becomes significant for the contemporaneous moment.

Finally, the play’s oscillation between the metaphorical dusk and dawn of the continent is contained in a nutshell in the photographic reproduction of Da Vinci’s mural in the accompanying program to the performance. However, it is printed in a manipulated fashion: On the first pages

the mural is printed in its entirety with several sections zoomed in on and superimposed on top of the complete painting in a montage. These montaged sections are then blown up and featured on individual pages on their own throughout the program next to the texts by the four other contemporary female European writers. The fragmentation of the mural is interesting as they feature hands as well as a closeup of the Apostle John. This fragmentation of the body echoes Mora's focus on the world itself as a body that is broken up into many provinces. The selection of montaged tiles from the original mural hints towards the gestural possibility inherent in the performance since the hands are open, perhaps in supplication for forgiveness or possibly as a sign of openness to the future. The futurity of the staging thus lies in its explicit emphasis on the interaction between the audience, the actors, and the texts themselves, and serves as an invitation to the audience to engage explicitly with what is being performed and its implications for the concrete question of European identity today.

## Conclusion

Ebenso wichtig ist, dass die Geschichte, die die verschiedenen Menschen mitbringen, auch Teil der Nationalgeschichte wird. Plötzlich ist Titos Tod auch ein Teil der Geschichte des Einwanderungslands Deutschland, so auch der Befreiungskrieg in der Türkei nach dem Zerfall des Osmanischen Reichs und die Transformationsprozesse in Georgien und Aserbaidschan.

It's just as important that the history, which different people bring with them, becomes part of the national history. Suddenly Tito's death is also a part of the history of immigration land Germany, similarly the emancipatory war in Turkey after the fall of the Ottoman Empire as well as the transformation processes in Georgia and Azerbaijan.<sup>249</sup>

*Deniz Utlu*

On the web portal *dichterlesen.net*, the authors Marica Bodrožić and Deniz Utlu curated the collection “Unterhaltungen deutscher Eingewanderten” [Conversations of German Immigrants].<sup>250</sup> This “audiovisueller Parcours” [audiovisual parcourse],<sup>251</sup> as the digital sound archive is described on the website, creates and presents a network of audio clips from historical and contemporary event recordings. The title of the collection, itself a reference to Goethe's *Unterhaltungen deutscher Ausgewanderten* [1795, Conversations of German Emigrants],

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<sup>249</sup> Marica Bodrožić and Deniz Utlu, “Unterhaltungen Deutscher Eingewanderten,” accessed July 3, 2023, <https://www.dichterlesen.net/unterhaltungen-deutscher-ingewanderten/>.

<sup>250</sup> The collection “Unterhaltungen deutscher Eingewanderten” was published on 18th January 2017 and is an initiative by the Literarisches Colloquium Berlin, Literaturhaus Basel, and the Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach. Marica Bodrožić was born in Croatia and has been living in Germany since 1983. Deniz Utlu was born in Hannover in 1983.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

highlights Bodrožić and Utlu's focus on exchange and situates writers who (or whose family) have migrated to Germany explicitly as German authors. Utlu names one of his own subsections "Die Nichtexistenz einer Migrationsliteratur" [The Non-existence of a Migration Literature] and argues that "Migrationsliteratur ist eine Perspektive auf Literatur, die nicht am Text ansetzt, sondern an einer Vorstellung von Gesellschaft" [Migration literature is a perspective on literature that does not depart from the text, but from an idea of society].<sup>252</sup> His explication of "migration literature" as a classification that is placed on a text rather than originating in the text itself draws attention to the significant weight biography has been assigned when discussing texts written by authors who have migrated to Germany. Utlu instead calls for a reconceptualization, or rather elimination, of so-called "migrant literature" and its status as outside of or as supplement to the corresponding national literature.

Similar to Utlu's avowal of the "Nichtexistenz" of a migration literature, this dissertation has argued for the inclusion of such contemporary German-language texts and the memories in them as thoroughly German by examining prose texts by Herta Müller, Nino Haratischwili, and Saša Stanišić as well as a multi-author theater production by five contemporary female authors (Terézia Mora, Elfriede Jelinek, Nino Haratischwili, Sofi Oksanen, and Jenny Erpenbeck). Several of the authors, like Utlu, reject categorizations of their work as "migration literature," with Haratischwili asserting that "eine gute Literatur hat keine Nationalität – Punkt. Kunst ist obdachlos" [Good literature has no nationality – period. Art is homeless].<sup>253</sup> Stanišić, on the other hand, adheres to some understanding of a national literature, but insists that to "speak of a

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<sup>252</sup> Translations from the portal are my own.

<sup>253</sup> Haratischwili quoted in Lerke von Saalfeld, ed., "'Eine gute Literatur hat keine Nationalität - Punkt. Kunst ist obdachlos' – Die Dramatikerin Nino Haratischwili," *Chamisso: viele Kulturen, eine Sprache* 4 (2010): 14–17.

single ‘immigrant literature’ is simply wrong, because it is wrongly simple.” He specifically argues that “[i]mmigrant literatures are not an isle in the sea of national literature, but a component, both in the depths, where the archaic squids of tradition live, and on the surface, where pop-cultural waves hit the shore.”<sup>254</sup>

In terms of authors in whose biography migration plays a role, this issue is oftentimes connected to memory. As Stanišić contends regarding “immigrant literature,” I have argued that migration or migrated memory does *not* remain an isle in the sea of national memory, separated without relation, but rather contributes to the collective memory and belongs to the national literature. As I have shown in the four chapters of this dissertation, post-socialist memory offers new perspectives to hegemonic Western ones, relating experiences of persecution as well as everyday life.

The *Hörraum* “Unterhaltungen deutscher Eingewanderten” on *dichterlesen.net* similarly considers the issue of national collective memory in terms of migrants, with an emphasis on those authors from Eastern Europe. Utlu and Bodrožić present excerpts from events and readings that look precisely at connections that can be made between histories of migration, the *Nationalgeschichte* of the “new” home, and countries of origin to explore these issues. Utlu’s own section, “Die Sprache des Archivs” [The Language of the Archive], has a particular gesture of opening up and transcending commonplace boundaries that are often arbitrarily attributed along contemporary political national borders, as his third subheading indicates: “Die Öffnung der Nationalgeschichte” [The Opening of the National History]. In its wording, the subheading recalls the common phrase relating to Germany’s divided past of the “Öffnung der Mauer” [Opening of the Wall] and shows the attempt to transcend a bounded definition of

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<sup>254</sup> Stanišić, “Three Myths of Immigrant Writing: A View from Germany - Words Without Borders.”



*Nationalgeschichte*. Utlu acknowledges that such a thing as shared memory exists, and that memory does have some significance in relation to nation since he still refers to historical events in reference to “der Geschichte des Einwanderungslands Deutschland.” This dialectical relationship recalls the transcultural lens of “multidirectionality” since Utlu similarly seeks to explore the relations between various collective memories and how they inflect memory on the national level. Utlu’s suggestion to incorporate defining events of other national histories into a German memory archive or its own *Nationalgeschichte* is novel. Similarly, in his response to the recent discussions of the so-called “Historikerstreit 2.0” [historians’ dispute 2.0], Jürgen Habermas emphasizes an immigrant’s agency and ability to change [*verändern*] or *expand* the national culture since they also have a public voice.<sup>255</sup> These moves to think through the interaction between migrant’s and nation’s respective memories resonate in the context of the current political landscape, since they reflect an attempt at resisting an increasingly nationalistic discourse, the rise of right-wing politics, and anti-immigrant movements (e.g., Alternative für Deutschland, Pegida) amid the 2010s European migrant crisis which were the background context when “Unterhaltungen deutscher Eingewanderten” was published.<sup>256</sup>

Shifting the perspective by taking migrant memory archives into account and reading these interactions with the German *Nationalgeschichte* as ones that belong to and *expand* it, is a productive way to transcend bounded definitions of memory and look at the multidirectionality in a future-oriented way. Müller, Stanišić, Haratischwili, and *Ein europäisches Abendmahl* relate

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<sup>255</sup> “Aber der Immigrant erwirbt gleichzeitig die Stimme eines Mitbürgers, die von nun an in der Öffentlichkeit zählt und unsere politische Kultur verändern und erweitern kann.” [Yet the immigrant at the same time gains the voice of a fellow citizen, which from now on counts in public and is able to change and expand our political culture]. Jürgen Habermas, “Der Neue Historikerstreit,” *Philosophie Magazin*, 2021, 10–11.

<sup>256</sup> The room was published online on 18<sup>th</sup> January 2017.

their immigrant protagonists' memories of events beyond Germany's geopolitical borders in ways that demonstrate that Utlu's suggestion is not only tenable but also integral to an understanding of the interactions between migrant memory archives and a German *Nationalgeschichte* informed by the collective memory post-unification.

Understanding the *Nationalgeschichte* as open to new access points from beyond geographic delimitations makes space for migrant perspectives to be offered in discussions of memory and recognizes that there are other memories of histories of violence that exist in and are a part of contemporary Germany. The intertextual relationship between the archive "Unterhaltungen deutscher Einwanderer" and Goethe's collection functions similarly to the authors' at the focus of this dissertation negotiations of post-socialist memories in the German memory landscape. This is already reflected in the play between the archive's title and its Goethean precursor. The change of prefix from *aus-* to *ein-* in their respective titles reveals a play on perspective and belonging that Utlu and Bodrožić's project highlights. Utlu and Bodrožić draw on Goethe, and therefore by extent the German canon which he personifies,<sup>257</sup> in a similar manner to the examined texts' interactions with German literature as ones that simultaneously connect to and expand the canon.

In Utlu and Bodrožić's project, they explicitly shift from the question of origins as seen in the model "Ausgewanderten" to an emphasis of where the migrants have travelled *to* and to where they have subsequently settled – they are "*Eingewanderten*." The Goethean title retains a temporal anteriority that focuses on the origin of the migrant that is also reflected today in the oft asked question "Where are you really from?." Utlu and Bodrožić's adaptation on the other hand

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<sup>257</sup> Alongside other key figures, Goethe's name as a signifier of the Western canon can be seen, for example, on the side of Butler library at Columbia University in New York.

centers a futural perspective that emphasizes the migrant's new home. The authors, therefore, retain Goethe's use of the substantive adjective to emphasize that the act of migrating is already completed and does not remain an eternal process of always immigrating into the new home – i.e., they use the past participle “*Eingewanderten*” and not “*Einwanderer*.”

This choice of “*Eingewanderten*” over “*Einwanderer*” also has implications for the expectations placed upon the immigrant in society. Continually labelled as an “*Einwanderer*,” the immigrant is consistently demanded to “adapt” and integrate into a limited idea of what the respective society is. The contemporary German poet and essayist Max Czollek describes this as a stance that continually indicates a “we were here first, you were here last” mindset, whereby problems arise when “perspectives offered by new arrivals are disregarded because they do not fit in with German expectations.”<sup>258</sup> This rigid sense of what it means to be a German or to live in Germany precludes the immigrant from ever fully integrating and leaves them trapped in the eternal process of trying to fit in and always falling short, including in discussions of memory and *Vergangenheitsbearbeitung*.

Looking at resonances between different memories and histories on the so-called “periphery” of Europe that are at play is a potential way to integrate post-socialist memories into the German memory archive. Through my reading of texts by several authors of the Eastern Turn with consideration to the broader concerns of history and memory discourses relating to the former socialist states – as opposed to a sole biographic reading – I avoid consigning them to this trope of being “between two worlds” and of being a part of a so-called “migrant literature,” whose existence Utlu, Stanišić, and Haratishwili question, since it implies the authors’

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<sup>258</sup> Valeriya Safronova, “In Germany, a Jewish Millennial Argues That the Past Isn’t Past,” *The New York Times*, January 19, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/16/books/max-czollek-germany-desintegriert-euch.html>.

exclusion from belonging to Germany, German-language literature, and to German collective memory.<sup>259</sup> In a memory landscape dominated by discussions of the Second World War and the Holocaust, authors of the Eastern Turn particularly seek to integrate post-socialist memories and experiences of state socialism as a new component in discussions of *Vergangenheitsbearbeitung*.

In this dissertation, I have shown how Müller, Haratischwili, and Stanišić as well as the play *Ein europäisches Abendmahl* narrate stories about Eastern European experiences under state socialism and explicitly narrate them in relation to canonical German events and literature – with a particular focus on World War Two. However, in their framing of these stories, I have argued that the authors emphasize the post-socialist aspects of memory and show it also belongs to European memory. They connect to discourses of German memory in a *multidirectional* way while at the same time claiming space for their post-socialist memory within this very German discourse of *Vergangenheitsbearbeitung* through their non-linear narratives. In this act of negotiation, they transcend a bounded definition of what constitutes a German memory by expanding the concept of what *can* belong through actively integrating memories from other countries into the German memory archive.

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<sup>259</sup> See Adelson's study on Turkish-German literature on the critical problems of such a paradigm, Adelson, *The Turkish Turn in Contemporary German Literature*.

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