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THE RIGHT (WAY) TO REPRESENT: THE EMOTIONAL POLITICS OF  
REMEMBERING MASS RAPE IN GERMANY AFTER 1945

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## ABSTRACT

*A Woman in Berlin* (1954) has undoubtedly shaped global understanding of wartime rape. The present article focusses on the diarist's use of humor to process her disorientation, assert her subjectivity, and build affective links with other victims. I consider how the diary's tone influenced its reception and thus how aesthetic analysis might illuminate the conditions under which stories about sexual violence become audible, as well as the ways in which the "cultural politics of emotion" (to quote the title of Sarah Ahmed's 2004 study) can both foster and obstruct human rights projects.

First published anonymously in the United States in 1954, the diary *A Woman in Berlin* is one of the most widely-cited personal testimonies of wartime rape. In near-daily entries, an unnamed German woman records her experience of May and June 1945; she becomes one of many hundred thousand to be sexually assaulted when Allied soldiers reached Germany (Grossmann, 1995, p. 46).<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that soldiers from all Allied armed forces perpetrated sexual violence. Nevertheless, as Naimark (1995) argues, “Rape became part of the social history of the Soviet zone in ways unknown to the Western zones,” especially given “the ubiquitous threat and the reality of rape, over a prolonged period of time” (pp. 107-08). This threat did not disappear entirely until 1949, when loopholes in existing fraternization orders were closed.

As the dust settled, these events were not forgotten. Wartime rape found citation in oral histories and political debates, as well as in fiction, film, and widely read memoirs of flight and expulsion from the former Eastern territories. For instance, women’s experiences were recorded in the eight-volume *Documents on the Expulsion of Germans from Eastern-Central Europe* (1953-1962), sponsored by the West German Ministry for Expellees, Refugees, and War Victims. These tomes aimed to demonstrate the scale of civilian suffering in an objective manner and therefore discounted reports containing “overly emotional observations that blur the rendering of events or the isolated consideration of particularly severe assaults” (Schieder, Diestelkamp, Rassow, Laun, & Rothfels, 1960, p. 4).<sup>2</sup>

Against this backdrop, *A Woman in Berlin* offered an unprecedented first-person account of wartime rape.<sup>3</sup> As Henry (2009) notes, “following the Second World War, the Nuremberg and Tokyo tribunals failed to adequately address and prosecute sexual violence, and no victims of rape were called to testify at these proceedings” (p. 115). Not until the creation of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in 1993 were survivors offered a public platform to describe the violence they had endured. Into the 1980s,

when German feminists began shining a light on wartime rape during the Second World War, *A Woman in Berlin* was a central point of reference (Schmidt-Harzbach, 1984; Hoerning, 1988; Sander & Johr, 1992). Helke Sander's monumental documentary *BeFreier und Befreite* [*Liberators take Liberties*, 1992], which repeatedly quotes from the diary, deserves special mention for its research and for giving women a forum to discuss the experience of wartime rape and its psychological and interpersonal aftereffects. Beyond German Studies, *A Woman in Berlin* continues to be named in examinations of wartime rape from disciplines spanning international law (Henry, 2010; Inal, 2013; Kelly, 2010), government and politics (Cockburn, 2010; Hirschauer, 2014), and philosophy (Schott, 2011; Tietjens Meyers, 2016).

It is worth noting that only the phenomenal international success of *A Woman in Berlin* could persuade the author to publish the diary in Germany, five years after its initial appearance in translation.<sup>4</sup> Her reluctance seemed justified given the subsequent hostile domestic reception in 1959. German critics accused the diarist of “cashing in on a national catastrophe, including the mass rapes, in a questionable manner” (“Eine Frau in Berlin,” 1960). The diary subsequently went out of print, until its republication in 2003, still under the cloak of anonymity. At this point, it featured on *Spiegel* magazine's nonfiction bestseller list on-and-off for a year. Reviewers consistently praised the diary for shattering “the last big taboo in German families” (Göbbel, 2010, para. 1). Ongoing discussions of the text were accompanied by widespread conversations about the history and legacy of wartime rape in Germany. Hence the heated nature of debates over its authenticity that emerged months after the release of the new edition, which I discuss in the last section of this piece.

In light of these debates, scholars increasingly read the diary as a “literary artefact” (Halley, 2008, p. 99). For Attridge (2015), to read a text as literary is to do more than simply “glean information from it” or “be disturbed, elated, or terrified by the mere content” (p. 266). The quality of literariness emerges in part from the reader's response to a text's “subtle

arrangements of language” (p. 274). *A Woman in Berlin* invites such a literary reading because of the author’s explicit process of revision, reflections on the power of writing to heal and inform, and her manipulation of language. According to Attridge, ultimately “it is through formed language that we are invited to participate in [literature’s] emotion-arousing capacities; this means we feel the emotions, but always as performances of language’s powers” (p. 267). This performance underpins literature’s power to open up an empathic connection to an imagined other, to their unique story and interpretation of it.

Inquiring into the specificity of “testimony” as a form that spans various discursive modes, Cubilié and Good (2003) highlight its ability to “evoke the human as a relation of one to an other or others: a relation to another narration, another trope, another body, another object, another time” (p. 8). Furthermore, in their path-breaking study *Testimony: Crises of witnessing in literature, psychoanalysis, and history* (1992), Laub and Felman consider the way that poetry and novels specifically constitute “a precocious mode of witnessing—of accessing reality—when all other modes of knowledge are precluded” (p. xx). In other words, literary language may find ways of conveying insight and feelings not easily captured by conventional discourse.

The present article builds on previous scholarship arguing that *A Woman in Berlin* is valuable not merely because it furnishes knowledge about a difficult historical period. As Wieden (2016) argues, “what makes the account so remarkable is not that the author narrates rape but how she narrates it, that is, its aesthetic perspective and rhetorical approach” (p. 26). Likewise, I maintain that the diary’s enduring import relates to its tone, which is often sardonic, and to its associative structure, which allows for reflective moments. By contrast, in institutional and, especially legal, settings testimony is elicited to answer a predefined set of questions. According to Simić (2014) therefore, “not only are women restricted in what they can say . . . they are also discouraged from discussing feelings, which is systemically

characterized as irrelevant, subjective, or even detrimental” (p. 52). These ideas chime with Garnsey’s (2016) views about the need to consider the aesthetic in transitional justice. As she summarizes in the abstract of her article:

Artworks can fill out affective topologies in ways that facilitate or stimulate recognition and a “feeling of being there.” This recognition is essential to comprehend and respond to the diverse claims of individuals and groups affected both directly and indirectly by conflict. (p. 471)

Along similar lines, Schaffer and Smith (2004) argue that “affect” deserves consideration alongside “awareness” and “action” as important effects of human-rights storytelling (p. 225). The current article pays particular attention to the cynical, at times humorous, tone of *A Woman in Berlin*. Following Ngai (2005), I understand tone as “a global and hyperrelational concept of feeling that encompasses attitude: a literary text’s affective bearing, orientation, and ‘set toward’ its audience and world” (p. 43). A focus on the use of irony, sarcasm, and wry humor to evoke the affective intensity of the war’s end sheds light on the diarist’s attempts to work through her disorientation, assert her subjectivity, and build links with other victims, connections that extend out to readers in global contexts. I am especially interested in how the tone of *A Woman in Berlin* influenced its reception. It is here that Ngai’s (2015) conceptualization of “tone” becomes particularly enlightening, for she argues that it is “reducible neither to the emotional response a text solicits from its reader nor to representations of feelings within the world of its story” (p. 41). Examining tone through a combination of close reading and reception study thus permits closer reflection on the instability of texts and testimonies as social products.

#### THE DIARY AND ITS HISTORY

*A Woman in Berlin* begins on 20 April 1945, Hitler’s final birthday and the date that the Red Army launched its first artillery salvos over the capital. The final entry covers the

week between the 16 and 22 of June, when the diarist remarks that she has filled several blotters with her shorthand notes. Early on, she reflects that her diary serves a double purpose: “I’m writing. It does me good, takes my mind off things. And Gerd [her partner] needs to read this if he comes back” (Anonymous, 2011, p. 28). The original German version finished with the narrator explaining that she had borrowed a typewriter to make a clean copy of her diary, “on paper that I found in the attic apartment. Nice and slowly, as and when my energy levels allow. Nice and clearly and without abbreviations like “Schdg” [denoting “Schändung,” the German word for defilement]. It is for Gerd to read when he returns” (qtd. in Bisky, 2003, p. 16).<sup>6</sup> The purpose of the diary is not therefore primarily to offer evidence or seek legal redress but instead to create “recognition, respect, and willingness to understand” on a local level (Schaffer & Smith, 2004, p. 226). This aim was amplified on a global scale by the diary’s publication.

The preface to the first American edition provides more information about the genesis of the text. This preface was written by C.W. Ceram, a postwar pseudonym of Kurt Wilhelm Marek, who was a journalist as well as an editor at the Rowohlt publishing house until his move to the United States in 1954.<sup>7</sup> He also wrote a bestselling book on popular archaeology. Ceram (1955) explains that he learned of the diary’s existence in 1946 and slowly convinced the author to let him read it. He recalls his astonishment at the content and relates that he took five more years to convince the author to publish her diary, anonymously (p. 7). The author’s choice to hide her identity bespeaks her awareness of the power dynamics of testimony and the risks of being ignored or misunderstood, especially pronounced given the loaded theme of sexual violence and the charged political context of the Cold War. This background played a role in marketing the first paperback edition of the diary with Ballantine Books in 1957. The front cover depicts the outline of a woman gripping a sheet to cover her body, against a backdrop evoking a city ablaze, with a blurb reading, “A woman’s night-by-night account of

how the Russians ravaged a city—and its women.” After the UK edition, which first appeared in the summer of 1955, numerous translations followed.

The first sign that the German market would be less receptive was the fact that the diary appeared with the small Swiss publishing house Kossodo, rather than Rowohlt, which published other works by Ceram/Marek. Due to harsh reviews, the author refused republication in her lifetime. In his preface to the 2003 edition, the novelist Hans Magnus Enzensberger (2008) who arranged for the republication, provides further details about the production context. He claims that the author started typing up and expanding on her scribbles in July 1945 (p. 5). This process of revision is signaled at several points in the diary: the entry for 19 May ends with the parenthetical comment: “July 1945 (scribbled in the margin): she was the first woman in the house to have an American: a cook, big belly, fat neck, the man keeps lugging packages up to her” (Anonymous, 2011, p. 233). The final artefact was 121 typewritten pages produced for a close friend (Enzensberger, 2008, p. 5). With Bloom (1996), it might therefore be appropriate to describe *A Woman in Berlin* as a “public” diary, aware of the “audience hovering at the edge of the page” that directs the “work’s ultimate focus, providing the impetus either for the initial writing or for transforming what might have been casual, fragmented jottings into a more carefully crafted, contextually coherent work” (p. 23). We might also assume that the narrator’s career as a journalist shaped how she perceived and composed her “personal” record (Redmann, 2008, p. 201). After all, within the diary, the narrator understands that she is experiencing “history” first hand, “the stuff of tales yet untold and songs unsung” (Anonymous, 2011, p. 35). This history draws the woman out of the sovereign existence she normally enjoys. She wants to be part of the crowd, share in its fate, “to belong to the nation, to abide and suffer history together” (2011, p. 35).

The woman’s education and professional background as journalist amplify her voice, allowing her to speak for the others with whom she is allied in the title of the published diary.

Yet this title downplays her privilege and should alert us to the “problems of speaking for others,” to cite the title of Alcoff’s influential work of feminist epistemology. When describing her status as witness, the narrator uses the word “Zeugenschaft,” a German noun that denotes the actual process of presenting oneself as a witness, as opposed to the incidental nature of bearing witness (Anonymous, 2008, p. 88). This particular noun also emphasizes the performance of witness, that which distinguishes literary testimony and realist historical fiction from history proper: “We learn from literature not truth, but what the telling (or denying) of the truth is . . . as testimonies, they witness in a powerful manner and at the same time, as literary works, they stage the activity of witnessing” (Attridge, 2015, p. 135).

Notably, this capacity is something that the diarist says she “feels” as a product of her empathy towards the Soviet troops<sup>8</sup>: “There probably aren’t many in this city who can talk to them, who’ve seen their birch trees and their villages and the peasants in their bast sandals” (Anonymous, 2011, p. 99). The narrator is aware that her knowledge of the Russian language and culture gives her a privileged perspective on events, as well as a greater sense of objectivity, because she knows more about the Soviet soldiers than their present violence. The diary humanizes the perpetrators of wartime rape by not glossing over the atrocities committed on Soviet soil. In fact, the diarist’s language skills mean that she is called on to testify to the soldiers’ suffering in front of the community and to the reading audience. On one occasion, she helps a group of soldiers explain that they had not seen their own families since 1941. Eventually, one reveals that German soldiers had murdered children when they invaded his village, even throwing babies against walls (p. 158). At points like these, the narrator includes cogitations on the causes for the violence inflicted on the women of Berlin. This episode concludes with a widely repeated sentiment about the actions of the Soviet soldiers: “Our boys probably weren’t much different over there” (p. 159). Despite the raw affects it records, the diary’s description of mass rape in the context of the preceding conflict

is remarkably nuanced. This level of critical reflection is, however, mostly absent when the narrator considers her own complicity in the actions of the National Socialist state.<sup>9</sup>

The narrator provides unflinching recapitulations of the mechanics of mass rape—who was assaulted when, where, and how many times—as well as a frank record of her own evolving psychological response to sexual violence, her shift from initial helplessness and numbness to an astonishing defiance and pragmatism. Writing plays a role in this process. After the first night of attacks, the diarist notes: “And now I’m sitting here at our kitchen table. I’ve just refilled my pen with ink and am writing, writing, writing all this confusion out of my head and heart” (p. 80). The detached tone of the narrative allows her to process events as though they were happening to someone else, thus safeguarding her sense of self. As she lies in bed, trying to sleep the next morning, the narrator feels

as if I were flat on my bed and seeing myself lying there when a luminous white being rose from my body, a kind of angel, but without wings, that floated high into the air . . . My true self simply leaving my body behind, my poor, besmirched, abused body. Breaking away and floating off, unblemished, into a white beyond. It can’t be me that this is happening to. (p. 81)

Such passages manifest Dawes’ (2009) eloquent argument that bringing “physical or psychic damage into language is to lift it out of the body or mind into the world, where it can be repaired or, at the very least, distanced” (p. 408). For Tietjens Meyers (2016), the advantage of such abstract poetic moments in the diary is that they mitigate the “experiential chasms” that might distance some readers from the narrated violence (p. 178).

Four days after the first attacks, and feeling physically sick, the woman comes to a decision: she will minimize unpredictable attacks by seeking out a high-ranking protector. She refuses to let herself be defined by what has happened to her body. As Wieden (2016) notes, “this slow but steady process of resistance is deeply anchored in her writing style” (p.

29). The unsentimental language used to record the horrors of the time often borders on wry humor. Early in the diary, the diarist relates a story about a young boy who had been killed by a shrapnel blow to the head during a bombing raid. Her interlocutor “pointed to her temple and showed us how the wound was gushing white and red. Tomorrow they’re supposed to resume selling the powder. Evidently the store has plenty left” (Anonymous, 2011, p. 54). Such laconic commentaries—as well as the unexpected juxtapositions of exceptional violence with the trivial—preserve a sense of the intense feelings experienced by the narrator that have not “found the right match in words” (Brennan, 2004, p. 5). When the diarist goes to the shop the next day, she notes that the vendor “insisted on giving every customer exact change, so he kept running up and down the queue asking who had small coins and could help him. And that while under fire! Only here. We’ll be counting our change right into the grave” (Anonymous, 2011, p. 61). Attempts to maintain order and uphold the familiar against the background of war contribute to the narrator’s grim sense of amusement. Following Burgess (2011), we might argue that the diarist’s translation of these indefinite, and therefore intractable, affects into a humorous tone marks her “entry into a narrative, cognitive, and agentive order” (p. 293). The tone created by the linguistic jolts and discordant juxtapositions central to the work’s gallows humor is not, however, reducible to emotional articulations, which Burgess claims are “subjective to the precise extent that they take teleological form,” leading to reflection or action (p. 294).

Defining black humor is a notoriously sticky endeavor. Where sometimes the response might “give rise to bitter or ironic or sardonic laughter or amusement, in other cases it is of a more extreme type which produces less amusement than horror or disgust” (O’Neill, 2010, p. 84). An example would be variations on the motto, “and for all of this we thank the Führer,” which the diarist ironically notes after seeing the state of a female neighbor who had been brutalized by a queue of rapists (Anonymous, 2011, p. 162). Instructive here is the

etymology of the German word “komisch,” which the diarist uses on several occasions, for example in the May 3 entry:

Something comical [“Komisches”]: while I was at the pump with the Pole, the widow had a visit from Petka, my ex-rapist with the blond bristle, the man who threw our sewing machine around. But he must have forgotten all about this drunken exploit; the widow says he was exceedingly friendly. He showed up lugging a beautiful yellow leather, Petka-sized trunk that another man would have had trouble. Spreading out the contents—mostly clothes—he indicated to the widow that she could take whatever she wanted, that everything was meant for her—while “nothing, nothing, nothing” was to go to me. (Anonymous, 2011, p. 137)

The word “komisches” used at the start refers both to the amusing, that which makes us laugh, and to the peculiar, that which flouts our expectations, such as child-like behaviour of a brutish rapist and the bizarre image of his carrying a bright suitcase matching his stature.

On another occasion the diarist looks back at an assault in her apartment: “Suddenly I feel insanely comical, standing there in front of three strange men in nothing but my candy-pink nightgown with its ribbons and bows” (2011, p. 76). For O’Neill (2010), black humor is “the humor of lost norms, lost confidence, the humor of disorientation” (p. 89). The link between humor and the collapse of norms is evident when one of the diarist’s cellar companions explains she has tied her wedding ring to her underwear: “If they get that far then the ring won’t matter much anyway,” a comment greeted with “general laughter” (Anonymous, 2011, 38). This “nervous merriment” has a cathartic effect (p. 37). It transforms fear and anxiety into what Chafe (2007) calls “the feeling of nonseriousness.” When aroused by matters that might otherwise provoke an earnest reaction, it acts as a “safety valve” that helps to “lessen whatever negative feelings were associated with what was being said” (p. 11, p. 85). Take for instance the jokes circulating amongst the local community of women.

“Better a Russki on top than a Yank overhead,” one quips, the effect amplified for the diarist by the speaker’s mourning attire (Anonymous, 2011, p. 37). We could classify this feeling of nonseriousness as one of the “ambient affects” described by Ngai (2005): “The unsuitability of these weakly intentional feelings for forceful or unambiguous action is precisely what amplifies their power to diagnose situations, and situations marked by blocked and thwarted action in particular” (p. 27). These ambient affects speak to the foreignness and deadening emotional impact of the events to which the diarist bears witness as war arrives in Berlin.

As well as generating black humor, juxtaposing the horrific with the banal conveys the extent to which previously inconceivable events have become normal. The narrative is littered with neologisms that evoke a radical departure from previous reality. With no small degree of self-irony, the women describe themselves as “step prey” (Anonymous, 2011, p. 140), their rewards as “major’s sugar” and “rape shoes” and discuss “sleeping-for-food” (p. 222). This humorous play on words evokes a feeling of nonseriousness and helps the women to desacralize sexual violence and debase the patriarchal language of rape, construed as a form of social death. When the diarist reflects on her own experience of assault, she muses, “What does it mean—rape? . . . It sounds like the absolute worst, the end of everything, but it’s not” (p. 83). The undeniably sociopolitical dimensions of women’s use of black humor in this context brings us close to understanding Ngai’s (2005) claim that “the ideology of a literary text may be, in fact, revealed more in its tone . . . than in any of its other formal features” (p. 48).

Humor allows the women to preserve the personal meaning of their experiences and thus becomes an important first step in their “working through the trauma of the rapes” (Schwartz, 2015, p. 5). In fact, in the diary conversations often focus on those aspects of the experience that can most easily be shared with others. As Crawford (2003) argues, “once speakers agree that they are engaging in humorous interaction, . . . socially unspeakable

topics can more readily enter the discourse, because the ambiguity of the humor mode allows them to be talked about in disguised and deniable form” (p. 1420). Often, the reported discussions provide a nuts and bolts account of the act of assault before moving on to more comical details that normalize the experience. As the narrator muses, “slowly but surely we’re starting to view all the raping with a sense of humor—gallows humor. We have ample grounds for doing so” (Anonymous, 2011, p. 146). She gives the example of a divorced neighbor who had told her that she was raped “one and a half times” after a Russian soldier had accosted her with the one-word question: “Syphillis?” (Anonymous, 2008, p. 134/2011, p. 146).<sup>5</sup> As Wieden (2016) notes, there is a certain degree of incredulity in the diarist’s retelling, for she is bemused, if not disparaging, about the fact that the divorcee did not exploit this question to feign poor sexual health and therefore, presumably, ward off her attacker (p. 43). After recounting the whole story, the neighbor pauses before grinning as she reflects, “So that’s what I’ve spent years waiting for” (Anonymous, 2011, p. 146).

Telling humorous stories and jokes is one way that members of the female community weave “moral webs” with others that position them “outside and beyond the identity of a victim into a self-conscious but also other-conscious subject who, in the act of narrating her/his own story and also that of others, constructs a whole new subjectivity” (Nayar, 2009, p. 1).<sup>10</sup> For the diarist, wartime rape demands storytelling, more than everyday sexual violence:

This mass rape is something we are overcoming collectively as well. All the women help the other, by speaking about it, airing their pain and allowing others to air theirs and spit out what they’ve suffered. Which, of course, doesn’t mean that creatures more delicate than this cheeky Berlin girl won’t fall apart or suffer for the rest of their lives. (Anonymous, 2011. p. 174)

Drawing on Nayar’s (2009) work on Indian human rights narratives, we can see that,

“by gesturing at another, [the diarist] constructs herself as the witness, the one who is affected by the pain of others: recording her distress, anger or pain at somebody else’s victimhood enables her to exert her agency as a feeling subject” as well as the right of other members of her community to have their experiences recognized (p. 12). For Tietjens Meyers (2016), moreover:

The “this is how it affected me” component of a victim’s story does not articulate what is true of everyone. Rather, it offers an intimate glimpse of what is true of a unique human being. Human rights enshrine the value of this uniqueness, along with the disvalue of attacking the humanity that people share. (p. 175)

Not everybody appreciates the humor adopted by the older, more sexually experienced women. When confronted with other victims who are clearly struggling, the diarist quickly suppresses her laughter and adopts another tone (Anonymous, 2011, p. 194). Amongst some of the women, though, humor fosters empathy and communication, drawing them out of their isolation and melancholy. For Nayar (2009), the weaving of such “moral webs” is “all the more significant because it is non-institutional and nonofficial. The individual takes the initiative to care for another of her own volition and through this affective process attains agency” (p. 13). We can see this when the diarist is attacked after a group of soldiers force their way into the apartment; meanwhile, the widow sneaks away unnoticed. She is sobbing out of guilt when she returns; however, the diarist simply “laugh[s] in the face of all the lamentation: ‘What’s the matter, I’m alive, aren’t I? Life goes on!’” (Anonymous, 2011, p. 78). Here, humor “strengthens, if only momentarily, a hold on life” (Colletta, 2003 p. 7). At several points, the diarist indeed repeats the Nietzschean formula: “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger” (Anonymous, 2011, p. 63, p. 246). Here, humor exists on a “grand scale” (Freud, 1960, p. 230). For Freud (2001), gallows humor displays “a magnificent superiority over the real situation,” releasing participants from a sense of

helplessness and despair, if only for a moment (p. 162). He claims that the grandeur of humor lies in the “triumph of narcissism—the victorious assertion of the ego’s invulnerability” (1960, p. 162). The ego refuses “to let itself be compelled to suffer” and rekeys painful experiences so that they produce pleasure (Freud, 2001, p. 162). In the diary, fear and worry are temporarily displaced through amusement and camaraderie. Although Ngai conceives tone primarily as “a relationship between the speaker and implied listener” (p. 41), it also plays an important role in allowing an individual to reconstruct a sense of agentic selfhood. The diary’s tone suggests that she has “some choice in [her] feelings” as she tells her story, as well as that she recognizes that “this past does not need to be defined exclusively by pain and suffering” (Hamilton, 2007, p. 66).

The “rapish wit” (Anonymous, 2011, p. 278) traded amongst the women also serves to diminish the Soviet victors, for instance by mocking their limited sexual prowess. When the diarist meets up with a friend she has not seen since the fall of Berlin, the latter remarks:

“Maybe they have the latest in socialist planned economies, but when it comes to matters erotic they’re still with Adam and Eve. I told my husband that too, to cheer him up.” Then she says with a wink, “with food so scarce a poor husband doesn’t count for much. Mine is already getting a complex about it; he thinks that the Red Army with all its ladykillers really has a chance with us women.” We laughed. (p. 239)

As the diarist explains, “we gossiped that way for a while, talking and taking our mocking revenge on everyone who had humiliated us” (p. 240). It is worth highlighting that their humor reveals a sense of superiority deeply embedded in Nazi racial doctrine. Elsewhere, the diary is littered with patronizing humor that mocks the simplicity of the soldiers and their wonder at watches and bicycles. Sometimes, this humor evolves out of moments of dramatic irony, for instance when the diarist tells Anatol, in Russian, that he is a

bear. He clearly believes that she has misspoken and corrects her: “No, that’s wrong. A *m’edv’ed* is an animal. A brown animal, in the forest. It’s big and roars. I am a *chelav’ek*—a person” (p. 104). The diarist gets the last, private laugh out of the dairy manager’s attempts to educate a much more educated person. Of course, such uses of humor may well “accede to rather than confront structures of power that promote injustice, inequality, and disengagement,” as Veldstra (2013) argues about cynicism and irony (p. 326). An obvious case of this risk are the diarist’s at times aloof comments about other women, for instance the distiller’s wife who had benefited from the black market during the war: “Now she’s paying for her unmerited fat” (Anonymous, 2011, p. 70).

*A Woman in Berlin* gives the impression that many men would have preferred women to suffer in silence, from those who leave the room when their wives begin to talk (or indeed make jokes) about their ordeal to others appalled at the women’s apparently cavalier treatment of rape—and their unwillingness to apologize for the strategies they had adopted to avoid brutal assault or ensure their survival. In the words of Alcoff (1995), therefore, “who is speaking to whom turns out to be as important for meaning and truth as what is said; in fact, what is said turns out to change according to who is speaking and who is listening” (p. 102). Towards the end of the book, the protagonist’s fiancé, Gerd, returns from war. When he listens to the women talking about their experiences and reads his fiancée’s shorthand scribbles, he is utterly disconcerted, telling her: “You’ve all turned into a bunch of shameless bitches, each one of you in the building. Don’t you realize?” (Anonymous, 2011, p. 305). He leaves soon after.

The last diary entry covers the week he is in Berlin. It begins with the words “I haven’t been writing. And I won’t be either—that time is over” (p. 304). Without the validation of her original intended audience, her writing no longer has a point. The openness of the diary’s conclusion is a feature it shares with many of the victim stories analyzed by

Tietjens Meyers (2016), which do not “end with the resumption of a normatively valued state of affairs” because the human rights of their authors “have yet to be realized” (p. 74). When *A Woman in Berlin* concludes, the narrator remains in limbo, in search of firewood and material to patch up the roof of her attic apartment, foraging for nourishment. She has limited time nor support for a spiritual existence.

#### EMOTION AND THE RIGHT TO REPRESENT

Gerd’s private reaction to the diary was amplified when it was first published in Germany. There were isolated positive reviews; for example, the national weekly *Der Spiegel* dispassionately defended the author against charges that she was profiting from a national catastrophe with cheap sensationalism. An oft-cited review in the daily newspaper *Der Tagesspiegel* indeed remarked that the diary would not be worthy of review if not for exceptional international sales figures. It describes the tone as “distressing,” and singles out the explicit descriptions and discussions of sexual violence for critique (qtd. in Schnabel, 2015, p. 137). The reviewer finds the jokes and discussions abhorrent, denigrating the diary as a lewd text. This response evinces the richness of Ngai’s (2005) definition of tone as a “formal aspect that enables . . . affective values to become significant with regard to how each critic understands the work as a totality within an equally holistic matrix of social relations” (p. 43). As a matter of fact, for the above reviewer, viewing the diarist as representative of all German women would be slander. Her review suggests tone’s intermediary position between affect and emotion. Ngai’s conceptualization of aesthetic tone is “dependent upon and even constructed around the very problematic that the emotion/affect distinction was intended to dissolve.” Tone “cannot be reduced to representations of feeling within the artwork, or to the emotional responses the artwork solicits from its viewers” (p. 28). Although its signification cannot be pinned down, the intense response to the ambient humor of the diary shows that tone is nonetheless “loosely tied to signifying practices” (p.

46). Resonant in this context is the colloquial expression, “to strike the right tone.” The reception of *A Woman in Berlin* is a stark reminder that recognition for survivors does not merely depend on what they have to say but also on how they frame it.

Several factors explain the especially harsh judgement of the diary in Germany. Of course, the events were much closer to home, and no doubt still very raw for some. After over a decade, German society—if not all its female members—might have preferred to forget these events. As Garraio (2012), points out, moreover, the self-critical and morally-sensitive representation of German wartime suffering in the diary was not wholly compatible with German memory politics at the time, which muted questions to do with German criminality and individual guilt, and tended to paint bombing, flight, and expulsion as forms of martyrdom and national catastrophe. As a result, the picture of the past in *A Woman in Berlin* “could not be integrated into the hegemonic discourses of the Federal Republic” (p. 41). Gender was, of course, one of these hegemonic discourses. The graphic reflections on sexual violence, not to mention frank and often rather withering discussions of everyday sexual violence, virginity, prostitution, and abortion simply did not gel with the conservative gender norms of the time (Dahlke, 2000, p. 204). As Schott (2011) observes, then, the diarist’s abject experiences force her “to the border of collective existence . . . The process of abjection implies that the social identification that takes place through pain, in the diary, is uneasy, unstable, at risk” (p. 26).

In his preface to the first translation in 1954, Ceram implicitly acknowledged that the diary might not be well suited to eliciting public understanding and sympathy. He sought to counteract moral censure of the diary by first relating his own initial shock at the stories. He insists from his own knowledge that the events are true. In this regard, Ceram functions as an “authenticating presenc[e]” who legitimates the work by emphasizing its uniqueness, and explicitly verifies its authenticity, by describing the old ledgers and loose pages that

contained the original diary (Alcoff, 1995, p. 99). References to the diarist's class and education appear designed to affirm her moral fiber. We may presume that the mention of her marital status is intended to deflect suspicions that she is a wayward woman. Ceram encourages the reader not to spurn the author, nor brand her shameless or a liar. His "speaking for" the author reinforces gendered discursive hierarchies, however. External certification here comes from a man, implying that a female author would not have been taken seriously on her own, especially since the diary is published anonymously. On top of this, Ceram (1955) justifies "the cold objectivity" of the diary, which he explains "was bound to develop because the emotions were frozen" (p. 8).

Ceram's introduction was partly responsible for the controversy prompted by the 2003 republication of the diary. Writing for the national broadsheet *Die Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Jens Bisky (2003) calls the diary a "well-orchestrated mystery" built around the premise of its authenticity as a spontaneous record of historical events (p. 16). The journalist deemed the obscure genesis and many versions of the diary suspect: the supposed initial scribbles, the first typescript, the first published version. Moreover, he points out inconsistencies between the 1959 and 2003 German versions of the text and concludes: "As a historical document the book is worthless. For now, it simply documents the activities of its editor" (p. 16). He views inconsistencies as signs of foul play that demand closer interrogation, especially since the marketing blurb professes that the diary "appeared without retouching with a small Swiss publishing house in 1959." Bisky is justified in wishing for more transparency about the evolution of such a historically important document. However, he does not consider that the revisions to the diary could be signs of its emotional authenticity, a trace of the author's ongoing process of coming-to-terms with what has happened. As Schwartz (2015) points out, writing becomes the woman's only way of working through her experiences after she is asked to move out of the widow's home and is rejected by Gerd (p. 5). We know from the narrator's

meta-reflections on the writing process that she sometimes went back to entries to expand on sections or add information that only came to light months later. It is conceivable that the negative reaction to the first German version of the diary also prompted a form of ongoing self-dialogue, reflected in the minor alterations to the language and structure of the diary.

Elsewhere Bisky's exposé is rife with contradictions. On the one hand, he suggests that the text mimics the generic conventions of testimony, but then implies that its literary qualities, such as the elevated descriptive language, use of anticipation, and effective characterization, are signs of invention (see Sollors, 2014. pp. 40-41). Considering narratives about Rwanda, Norridge (2012) debunks the apparent distinction between literary and non-literary language, arguing that subjective writing about atrocities often does remain "concerned with the beautiful and the stylized. While many Rwandans who publish are not writers by profession, they are often highly educated and usually occupied positions of privilege in their local community" (p. 242). The same applies to the narrator of *A Woman in Berlin*. The literary elements are not surprising given how often she reflects on the absurdity of her life. She tells one story about parents who had hidden their daughter underneath a chaise longue, covered by a blanket, which their Russian guest promptly sat on. The narrator's sardonic commentary: "Our lives are all rumors and melodrama, one big kitschy novel" (Anonymous, 2011, p. 131). Literature also provides a point of orientation for describing her experience of war and invasion. She muses that the tales about the legendary bravery of the Spartan soldiers in the Battle of Thermopylae offer little of value to women (p. 39). Moreover, culture is a comfort. During the bomber raids, the diarist tries to recite lines from poetry by Meyer Conrad Ferdinand and Anwari Soheili (p. 27). After revelations about German atrocity, she is consoled by reading the classic works of Rilke, Goethe, and Hauptmann: "The fact that they, too, are also German is some consolation" (p. 293). The process of writing likewise helps the narrator. In the May 7 entry, she dwells on the feelings

of melancholy that emerge after a day of freedom and visiting old friends for the first time since the fall of Berlin. She also feels ambivalent due to her growing reliance on and ambivalent feelings toward the Soviet major with whom she has relations, initially in order to ward off violent, anonymous attacks. The entry concludes with a parenthetical note, “weeks later, scribbled in the margin, to be used by novelists” (p. 171). In the following paragraph, the woman generates hallucinatory imagery in an attempt to express her ambivalence, as well as a sense that she is betraying her absent fiancé:

For three heartbeats her body became one with the unfamiliar body on top of her. Her nails dug into the stranger’s hair, she heard the cries coming from her own throat and the stranger’s voice whispering words she couldn’t understand. Fifteen minutes later she was all alone. The sunlight fell through the shattered panes in broad swathes. She stretched, enjoying the heaviness in her limbs, and brushed the tousled fringe back from her forehead. Suddenly she felt, with uncanny clarity, a different hand burrowing into her hair, the hand of her lover, perhaps long dead. She felt something swelling, churning, erupting inside her. Tears came streaming out of her eyes (p. 171).

Here, the reader is encouraged to search for meaning in poetic descriptions that evoke a similar sense of confusion as the narrator’s conflicted feelings about her relationship to the major. As Sollors (2014) notes, this passage evokes clichés and stock melodramatic tropes otherwise absent from the diary (p. 45). The creative process helps the diarist to find words for her mental state and work through her emotions. The abstract nature of this passage, which evokes ghostly hands, is one of the ways in which the writer “casts her ordeal in universally comprehensible terms” (Tietjens Meyers, 2016, p. 174). It creates a paradigmatic example of what Glazer (2017) calls a “virtual presence”: “The reader does not literally perceive (or have the perceptual experience of) an emotion in the written text; rather, she imagines herself perceiving (or having the perceptual experience of) that emotion” by

imagining the physical presence of the character and her textual performance of affect and emotion (p. 186). Such literary embellishments to the diary are also aligned with the second constituent feature of “virtual presence.” By suggesting that she is playing with language to work through her feelings, the diarist “creates a suitable context for the reader to imaginatively engage with the text” (p. 186). Refusing to name emotions explicitly might be conducive to this process. As Greenwald Smith (2015) argues, in the reading process, affective reactions may be dulled “if an emotional cue is so readily available that it jumps the bodily circuit and remains purely mental” (p. 69). In *A Woman in Berlin*, the use of literary techniques to defamiliarize everyday language also causes the reader to embark on cognitive journeys that mirror those taken by the narrator. Gallows humor also stages feelings of nonseriousness in ways that is well suited to unsettling the reader, alerting them to the fact that they need to open their minds to the unexpected. Consequently, the reader may be “actively engaged in an act of moral reparation by participating in ‘shared understanding’ . This has the capacity to produce empathy” (Simić, 2014, p. 62).

Bisky’s (2003) apparent belief that the poetic is not a trustworthy language leads him to ask, “Was there really an unknown woman in Berlin or is she a literary figure?” (p. 16). Having called the diarist’s authorship into question, he then paradoxically reveals her identity. Pursuing a tip from a reader, and following the biographical allusions in the diary, Bisky claims that the author was Marta Hillers. He reconstructs her biography, showing that one of her cousins wrote propagandistic texts during the Third Reich and vouched for Marek upon his entry into the Reich Association for German Writers. In turn, Marek vouched for Marta Hillers. Bisky then reveals that she published travel texts in Germany during the Nazi period. Her documented love for her homeland and criticism of the effects of the Versailles Treaty on German infrastructure go uncommented but imply Bisky’s attempts to discredit Hillers based on her politics. Indeed, he disputes Enzensberger’s claim, made in an interview

with the Hessischer Rundfunk radio station, that the author was a journalist who had probably “hibernated” during the Third Reich by writing for an unpolitical fashion journal (qtd. in Bisky, 2003, p. 16). Bisky divulges that Hillers actually wrote and edited youth educational pamphlets, one encouraging boys to join the navy. He ultimately indicts the author as a “small time propagandist” (p. 16).

The focus on Hillers’ (and Marek’s) potential Nazi affiliations raises the question of who has the right to tell such stories—and how. To quote Halley (2008), “Bisky implies that we should not look to good citizens of the Third Reich and Soviet sympathizers for our definitive account of the fall of Berlin” (p. 93). Since the 1960s, perpetration has been the central topic in German memory politics, with discussions of wartime suffering associated with revanchist views. Aspects of Bisky’s review demonstrate the enduring thorniness of these issues. He shifts attention away from the universal nature of wartime rape (a recurrent motif in twenty-first century reviews of the book) to the figure (and legitimacy) of this particular victim. His queries exemplify Gilmore’s (2017) use of the term “tainted witness” to describe the way that “women’s witness is discredited by a host of means meant to taint it: to contaminate by doubt, stigmatize through association with gender and race, and dishonor through shame, such that not only the testimony but the person herself is smeared” (p. 2). For Gilmore, it is imperative that we learn “to read the testimony of tainted witness” and decode its struggle to achieve audibility (p. 132). Doing so not only challenges the ideological assumptions that make doubt stick to gender, race, religion, and class. It also expands cultural constructions of “harm, agency, and justice” and pushes us to rethink what we mean by considering empathy as an ethics. The delicate topic of German wartime suffering exemplifies Gilmore’s belief that “tainted witness” evokes a mode of recognition “more fraught but more suited to the broken world from which testimony arises” (p. 132).

Unification in 1990 superficially ended the most visible legacy of the Nazi period, the division of Germany. It was therefore followed by less inhibition in memory politics and a more balanced approach to the totality of the German past, from persecution, occupation, and murder to the devastation of war. This shift suggests why Bisky's revelations about Hillers' politics had limited impact on how the diary was received more widely. The emergence of more nuanced perspectives on the past, and an understanding of the complex nature of political victimhood, is promising in terms of the human rights project. Tietjens Meyers (2016) argues that the "stories that have the greatest potential for moral generativity are also stories that are vulnerable to readings that are hostile to human rights." Precisely because they question taken-for-granted and embedded assumptions about victimhood, they challenge readers "to better grasp the meanings of human rights in human lives and perhaps to identify shortcomings in current conceptions of human rights" (p. 106). By engaging readers on an extended emotional and interpersonal level, literary narratives are particularly well suited to prompting such rethinking, in comparison to more objective, condensed narratives that posit different relationships to readers.

The controversy prompted by Bisky's review ultimately boiled down to the relative epistemological and ethical claims of different modes of reading. Towards the end of his piece, Bisky (2003) claims that, "we are dealing with a literary book of non-fiction, edited by an author who established the non-fiction genre in Germany" (p. 16).<sup>11</sup> He speculates on the extent of Marek's involvement in the writing of the diary, upgrading him from authenticating subject to possible co-author. After all, some of the phrases and terms used appear uncharacteristic of Berlin dialect. One possible explanation is the fact that Marek came from Hamburg. Bisky's allegation that the diary might be a forgery betrays a concern about the inauthentic, and therefore potentially manipulative, ends to which the reader's feelings are roused. Indeed, the journalist questions what motivated Marek to seek a New York publisher

for the diary. Such an ostensibly anti-Russian book would surely have endeared a new emigrant to a U.S. publishing world potentially skeptical about the German's Nazi credentials. After all, Marek had worked as a war propagandist in the early stages of the Third Reich. If these factors played a role in his sponsorship of the diary, it would represent a shift in Marek's views. At the Frankfurt Writer's Congress of 1948, he trenchantly criticized the fact that "the eastern part of Germany was becoming a zone of politicized literature, featuring writers who saw their function explicitly as supporters of propagandistic political campaigns" (Brockmann, 2009, p. 156). Nonetheless, Marek's introduction to *A Woman in Berlin* does include some statements with propagandistic resonance. It evokes "the red apocalypse that overwhelmed the capital," something that the book covers for the English paperback editions also conjure up. Nor is the diary itself free of the sort of stereotypes that saturated anti-Bolshevist propaganda in the Nazi period and Federal Republic of the Cold-War era. The diarist mentions the "yellow" eyes "like slits" of some of the rapists, reflecting also on their childishness and primitivism (Anonymous, 2011, p. 69, p. 107).

All wars and their aftermath are shaped by propaganda. It is right that we consider the conditions under which memory texts are produced, and the political dynamics that influence their writing, as well as how they are distributed and received. The Cold War packaging of *A Woman in Berlin* is an important reminder that there is nothing inherently progressive about culture's appeal to affect, which can be channeled in unintended and potentially reactionary directions. However, as Schaffer and Smith gesture in *Human Rights and Narrated Lives* (2004), processes of appropriation and commodification "can never completely take control of testimonial texts, which continue to produce unpredictable meanings" (p. 27). In fact, contemporary reviews of *A Woman in Berlin* rarely amplified its potentially propagandistic content. According to Kempe (2012), some in West Germany even criticized the author for engaging in anti-communist propaganda (p. 15). By contrast, English-language reviews in the

1950s tended to highlight the author's "passive attitude toward the Nazi government" (Keene, 1954, p. 3; Peel, 1954, p. 23).

Ultimately, Bisky implies that the truth-value of the diary is radically compromised by its unspoken politics. Yet it is precisely the historical and judicial search for plain facts, and distrust of emotion and interpretation, that might prevent survivors of sexual violence from comfortably telling their stories. While the facts relating to the act of wartime rape are fundamental to prosecution, they risk imposing a premature ending on the story of sexual violence, which has a physical and psychological aftermath (Henry, 2010, p. 1106). These reflections go some way towards explaining why *A Woman in Berlin* was celebrated widely for breaking a taboo when it was republished in Germany in 2003. Compared to texts in different genres that had broached the topic of wartime rape in preceding decades, the anonymous diary is unique in its extensive focus on the emotional consequences of this history. Its personal perspective "provides an affectively powerful understanding" of the way that subjective injury outlasts the moment of attack (Tietjens Meyers, 2016, p. 176). It thus produces a different kind of knowledge than legal or historical testimony. What is more, the diary is written in a manner that defies and reshapes both the generic expectations of testimony and ideological notions of victimhood. As Ahmed influentially argues, the ways that texts generate feelings "involve different movements towards and away from others, such that they shape the contours of social as well as bodily space" (2004/2014, p. 209). It is in this manner that the "cultural politics of emotion," to quote the title of her study, can both foster and obstruct human rights projects. By restricting "access to recognizable emotion," the diary prompts a spontaneous response to an unpredictable subject (Greenwald Smith, 2015, p. 69). Without this subjective recognition, and the acknowledgement that the legacy of violence has both ongoing material and affective dimensions, the cultural basis for supporting survivors and changing attitudes towards sexual violence will be shaky indeed.

## NOTES

1 The highest estimate is 1.9 million (Sander & Johr, 1992, p. 58).

2 Unless otherwise stated, all translations from German texts are my own.

3 Later works from other conflicts include Alaine Polcz, *Asszony a fronton* (1991), published as *A Wartime Memoir: Hungary 1944-1945* (Albert Tezla, Trans.) in 1998, and Agate Nesaule, *A Woman in Amber: Healing the Trauma of War and Exile* (1995).

4 International sales allegedly reached half a million before the author overcame her reluctance to publish her work in German (“Eine Frau in Berlin,” 1960).

5 The 2011 English translation is less succinct: “She told us that one of the men pointed to her cheek and asked if she had syphilis” (p. 146).

6 Curiously, the 2003 republication in German removed this passage.

7 According to an obituary, Marek adopted a pseudonym “because in his native Berlin he had become well known as a writer on the theatre, the films, and literature, and he did not want to have booksellers asking why the critic had turned to archaeology as a subject” (“C.W. Ceram of ‘Gods, Graves and Scholars’ Dies,” 1972). His author biography on the website of Penguin Random House suggests that his decision related to his work in a Wehrmacht propaganda troop during the war. See <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/authors/4566/cw-ceram>

8 In the German, the diary uses the verb “fühlen,” which can mean “to feel,” but which Boehm translates as to “have a sense of.”

9 As Schott (2008) points out, the diarist “traces a relation between suffering bodies and national identity that is embedded in a Nazi conception” (p. 26).

10 Nayar borrows the term “moral webs” from Zarowsky (2004, p. 194).

11 Suspicions that Marek was the true author subsided when Walter Kempowski, author of an epic collective diary of World War II, verified the existence of the original notebooks and subsequent typescript (Seibt, 2004, p. 14).

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## BIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Katherine Stone works closely on the impact of gender on conceptualizations of violence. Her first monograph *Women and National Socialism in Postwar German Literature: Gender, Memory, and Subjectivity* (2017) examines emotional and cultural barriers to understanding the full extent of women's complicity in the Third Reich. She is currently developing a larger research project on the cultural memory of wartime rape in post-1945 Germany, which will draw on theories of affect in order to investigate how the reception of difficult histories shifts over time and, ultimately, to illuminate how societies produce knowledge about individual and collective trauma.