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The Mass Rapes of 1945 in German Memory:
The (Gender) Politics of Metaphor and Metonymy
Abstract
This article takes Jenny Erpenbeck’s provocative novel *Heimsuchung* (Visitation, 2007) as an opportunity to consider how the mass rape of German women in 1945 has functioned as a ‘mnemonic signifier’, that is, a symbolic figuration of broader memory discourses (Feindt, Krawatzek, Mehler et. al., 2014). Through a close reading of this work, I show this mnemonic signifier often dovetails with cultural ‘rape scripts’ that determine if and how sexual violence is addressed, recognized, and understood. Exploring how wartime rape has been remembered thus opens up new perspectives on the social and political salience of memory. This article consequently addresses the need for a ‘mnemographic ethics’ that foregrounds the victims of historical violence and their experiential realities, matters that are all too easily suppressed or transfigured in processes of remembrance and interpretation. It argues that literature can offer a model for such a practice.

**Keywords:** wartime rape; metaphor; cultural memory; ethics of representation; German literature; feminism
In 2007, German author Jenny Erpenbeck was labelled a provocateur when she read an excerpt from her unpublished novel, *Heimsuchung*, at the Alfred Döblin literary competition. Erpenbeck raised eyebrows with her graphic rendering of a difficult historical theme: the widespread sexual violence against German women at the end of World War II. Conservative estimates suggest that several hundred thousand German women were sexually assaulted as Allied — and particularly Red Army — soldiers advanced across and occupied Germany (Grossmann, 1995: 46). As the dust settled, this experience was not forgotten: it was consistently documented in historical accounts, memoir, film, and literary fiction. This fragmentary chatter rarely generated sustained public conversations about the mass rapes, however. For much of the twentieth century, public discourse surrounding wartime rape was dispersed, sporadic, and highly symbolic, shaped as it was by broader debates about the Nazi past and German identity (Heineman, 1996; Cohen-Pfister, 2006; Dahlke, 2007; Krimmer, 2015a; Gebhardt, 2016). Levels of public engagement with wartime rape thus function as a barometer for both memory and feminist politics in the Federal Republic of Germany, the German Democratic Republic, and now the so-called Berlin Republic.

It is no coincidence that public discourse about the mass rapes intensified after Reunification in 1989. With the end of the Cold War, narratives about rape no longer served as a battering ram in the ideological battle between East and West. The stage was set for intensified public engagement with the mass rapes by the six-hour documentary film *BeFreier und Befreite* (Liberators take Liberties, dir. Helke Sander, 1992), which was widely screened in cinemas and on television after its release. However, the film generated
debates in academic circles because it elected to present the women as victims of transhistorical and transnational patriarchal aggression rather than engage with the political and historical circumstances that had led to the occupation of Germany (Grossmann, 1994; McCormick, 2001; Bos, 2006). Sander’s feminist politics of victimhood jarred with a German memory politics centred on German responsibility. The mass rapes have been firmly anchored in cultural memory since the beginning of the twenty-first century, when established paradigms for remembering the Nazi past, focussed on guilt and complicity, were expanded to include memories of wartime suffering (Moeller, 2001; Niven, 2006). As part of this wider trend, wartime rape and its subjective legacy has been explored in a number of prominent novels, including Hans-Ulrich Treichel’s *Der Verlorene* (1998), *Menschenflug* (2005), and *Tagesanbruch* (2016), Reinhard Jirgl’s *Die Unvollendeten* (2003), Julia Franck’s *Die Mittagsfrau* (2007), Kathrin Gerlof’s *Alle Zeit* (2009), and Ulrike Draesner’s *Sieben Sprünge vom Rand der Welt* (2014). Renewed discussion of mass rape was particularly triggered by the diary *Eine Frau in Berlin* (1959), which was originally published in English as *A Woman in Berlin* in 1954 and became a bestseller when it was republished in Germany in 2003.

Erpenbeck’s decision to write about wartime rape was thus not particularly novel. What appeared to shock attendees at the Alfred Döblin competition was her decision to narrate this ponderous historical theme from the perspective of the apparent rapist. As the Soviet soldier remembers his encounter with a German woman, the lines between violence and seduction, victim and aggressor, become uncomfortably blurred. Writing for the *Tageszeitung* newspaper, Jörg Magenau (2007) reports that the public therefore took the
reading for ‘deliberate “effrontery” …, precisely because it does not draw on the cliché of the German woman raped by a Soviet soldier’. That Magenau does not elaborate on the nature of this cliché is testament to its axiomatic status in German memory culture. His comment indicates the existence of an unspoken script for discussing wartime rape in which the German woman and the Red Army officer play fixed and unambiguous roles: the innocent victim and the barbaric perpetrator (Gebhardt, 2016: 93). Reading Erpenbeck’s scene in the context of its reception thus provides an opportunity to unpick the key components of this naturalized memory script and examine its cogency in post-unification Germany.

Erpenbeck’s rape scene is ideally suited to illuminating how wartime rape has functioned as a ‘mnemonic signifier’, that is, as a symbolic figuration of broader memory discourses (Feindt, Krawatzek, Mehler et. al., 2014: 31). The novel in which it features, Heimsuchung (published later in 2007), presents a kaleidoscopic view of German history from the dawn of the industrial era to the fall of the Berlin Wall, juxtaposing stories of Jewish persecution during the Third Reich with accounts of German complicity in the regime, considering political privilege in the German Democratic Republic alongside tales of emigration. Adopting a multiperspectival approach to German history and emphasizing the contingency of cultural memory, Erpenbeck’s novel can be understood as a literary take on the practice of ‘mnemography’, a history of memory and its interpretations, which Feindt, Krawatzek, Mehler, Pestel, and Trimčev (2014) argue can provide insight into ‘the discourse of memory, its comprehensibility, and social scope’ (p. 31). Heimsuchung is well placed to elucidate the final point because it interweaves the historically specific with
broader questions to do with vulnerability, home, agency, and power that transcend and indeed draw together the disparate stories. As central narrative motifs, symbolic and physical violence against women, in particular, shed light on the complex entanglement of gender, sexuality, and memory.

The present article primarily explores how wartime rape has been remembered in order to open up new perspectives on the social and political salience of memory. The main purpose of this article is thus not to provide a comprehensive overview of the meanings that have been ascribed to wartime rape since the end of World War II. Building on previous scholarship, I argue that wartime rape, as mnemonic signifier, often dovetails with and reinforces cultural ‘rape scripts’ that determine if and how sexual violence is addressed, recognized, and understood. The first section of this article argues that that the cultural memory of wartime rape is underpinned by a ‘gendered grammar of violence’, a set of structures and rules that observers draw on in order to make sense of this memory and determine who is assigned the role of victim or perpetrator, subject or object in any given scenario (Marcus, 1992: 392). The second part of this article considers the ethical and gender-political implications of this script. For representing wartime rape as national trauma is not the same as listening to or ethically responding to the victim. To conclude I argue that literature offers a model for a ‘mnemographic ethics’ that foregrounds the victims of historical violence and their experiential realities, matters that are all too easily suppressed or transfigured in the production of cultural memory.
The Rape of the Nation

Heimsuchung presents a geographical cross-section of modern German history, unravelling the fate of a plot of land and the people that inhabit it. Erpenbeck’s exploration of the past through the vicissitudes of space presents the opportunity for an allegorical reading of the driving forces of history, namely concerns about home, belonging, security, possession, and exclusion. These themes find metaphorical expansion in the representative figures that appear in the individual chapters of the novel and who ‘become either agents or victims of discrimination, persecution, and displacement’ (Eigler, 2012: 46). These roles are often blurred, for the social standing and ontological security of each character shifts depending on the political status quo. Rather than reifying experiences of victimhood and complicity as identity markers, Erpenbeck’s polyvocal novel paints a complex picture of vulnerability, agency, and moral responsibility.

A pivotal section of the book records the diverging fortunes of a German architect and a Jewish cloth manufacturer. The German is an associate of Albert Speer, the architect who rose through the ranks of the NSDAP to become Minister for Armaments and War Production. His success allows him to cheaply purchase the property of his ‘fully Jewish’ neighbours — for half its value — and thus finance their attempt to flee Germany. As Elisabeth Krimmer (2015b) notes, ‘far from recognizing the injustice of the expropriation of Jewish property, the architect casts himself as a saviour who helps his neighbours escape’ (p. 46; see also Pye, 2013: 125). Most of the cloth manufacturer’s family leave it too late to emigrate, however, and a subsequent chapter describes their deportation and murder.
Ignorance and indifference are the prerequisites for the carefree atmosphere that the architect and his wife cultivate at their weekend home. When a film director friend explains how difficult it is to make his Aryan actors look Jewish, the architect wishes him luck, while his wife serves up an aphorism: ‘Humour is when you laugh all the same’ (p. 52). This phrase is a refrain of the chapter focalized through the perspective of the architect’s wife; it signals the need for fortitude in the face of adversity. This luxury is clearly not available to other characters. The bitter irony of this interlude is the ignorance and indeed disinterest of the friends who commiserate over the consequences that the marginalization of the Jews will have for them. The sheer self-absorption of the figures is further indicated by the fact that their conversation is vaguely identified as having occurred ‘on one of those summer evenings during one of the last twenty years’ (p. 52). The frivolity of the architect and his wife more or less continues after the war. He jokingly tells a story about their gardener, who had wept upon discovering that Red Army soldiers had turned the lawn into a paddock when they temporarily set up camp there on their way to Berlin. Another guest draws on the catchphrase of his hosts (‘humour is when you laugh all the same’) to comment on this story.

The architect’s wife remains quiet, however, her thoughts drifting now to her own experience of the evening when she had encountered the ‘Slavic hordes’ (p. 54). Such language is not uncommon in German narratives about mass rape, which reflect ideas of racial superiority fuelled by Nazi propaganda. As Júlia Garraio (2013) has demonstrated with reference to a range of widely-discussed texts about mass rape, this conception of the Soviet rapist was exploited after 1945 in the construction of a pro-European and pro-
Western German identity. The memory of wartime rape is explicitly evoked in an anti-communist propaganda poster circulated by the People’s League for Peace and Freedom that depicts a Red Army soldier with flat facial features and dark skin grasping for a German woman. The poster is annotated with the words ‘come here, woman ...’ and ‘this will be reality if you follow Pieck, Grotewohl, Dorls, Gereke, Remer, and comrades’ (Volksbund für Frieden und Freiheit e.V., 1952). This poster exemplifies the extent to which the memory of rape was instrumentalized to consolidate a West German identity ‘defined in large part by the need to face the threat from the East’ (Heineman, 1996: 373).

Reading *Heimsuchung* in its German context, the loaded phrase ‘and then the Russians came’ is enough to conjure up the spectre of wartime rape (p. 54). Through such euphemisms, the chapter narrated from the perspective of the architect’s wife activates a standardized memory script in which the Soviet soldier plays the role of brutal, vengeful, and ultimately atavistic rapist. The encounter between the German woman and Soviet officer is not named as such but evoked through resonant allusions to an ‘unthinkable word’ with which the Russian had disabled the woman (p. 54). The elliptical description of the encounter barely covers a page:

All the while, for nearly six years now, time has been draining away through that hole the Russian drilled in her eternity near the end of the war. Only because times are hard has something like a historical moment of inertia set in, only because times are so hard that time has trouble even just running away — it’s having to take its
time — does the architect’s wife still sit there on her terrace six years after the war, sit there with a pot filled with crabs boiled till they are red, serving up her guaranteed punchlines to her friends, laughing herself harder than anyone (p. 73).

This passage is consistent with many literary and autobiographical accounts of wartime rape, in which the violent act is evoked ‘in quasi-formulaic language, but not narrated extensively’ (Krimmer, 2015a: 83). Such a rhetoric of allusion has developed in part due to the stigma attached to the experience of rape. As this chapter of Heimsuchung develops, the laughter of the architect’s wife takes on new meaning as a possible cover for a trauma that she struggles to articulate. In fact, while the architect and his wife are normally a comedic double act at their parties, she does not contribute to the story of the trampled garden. Just as her voice is muted in this story, so are her emotions. After all, the narrative impetus is the architect’s anecdote about returning home to find the gardener ‘weeping at the devastation’ left by the Red Army (p. 54). Although the land is conventionally the object of the German verb ‘verwüsten’, which denotes ‘devastation’ in the original text, its effects can be extended to individuals, especially in the context of war. Here, the damage done to the garden stands in for the assault on the architect’s wife. This symbolically rich passage extends a metaphor that is central to the novel: the analogy between women and Heimat, or homeland. For centuries, literary figures have associated women with the longed for, cherished homeland, a source of stability and simplicity in an increasingly turbulent world. Oedipal references suffuse writing on Heimat, which idealizes women as mothers, as
figures of origin or retreat, to be protected at all costs. This metaphor imagines women to be inherently vulnerable to attack (Blickle, 2002: 42). As Julie Mostov (2012) notes, the linguistic and conceptual gendering of boundaries in fact ‘makes possible the use of sexual imagery of courtship, seduction, and violation’ in nationalist narratives all too often taken literally in times of conflict (p. 90). Such narratives circumscribe the symbolic meaning of wartime rape in cultural memory in which acts of sexual violation are figured as attacks on men and national identity.

Since 1945, rape – like many other aspects of women’s wartime experience – has functioned as a powerful symbol for the suffering of the nation as a whole (Grossman, 1995: 62). Women’s experience seemed ‘especially well suited’ for allowing Germans to consider themselves of victims, first of National Socialism, and then of the war on German soil (Heineman, 1996: 367). In Germany, the end of the war was indeed dubbed ‘the hour of the woman’. This byword reduces women’s experiences of the Third Reich to their experience of the war on the home front and their role in the reconstruction of Germany. It crystallizes and condenses the attitudes to women enshrined in the popular historical consciousness, in which women are cast ‘persistently as victims and heroines, only rarely as accomplices, and never as perpetrators’ (Heineman, 1996: 392; see also Fendl, 2010, and Hahn and Hahn, 2010). Conventional memories of wartime rape promote binary thinking through a gendered construction of self and other based primarily on moral categories such as victim/perpetrator and innocence/guilt, which are often readily conflated. The naturalized association between women and political innocence is made explicit in the first memorial dedicated to German women victimized by the war, which was erected in the
Standortfriedhof in Berlin-Neukölln in 2001 to honour the ‘victims of expulsion, abduction, rape, and forced labour. Innocent children and mothers, women and girls’. This rhetoric recurs in Ingo von Münch’s ‘Frau, komm!’ (‘Come here, woman’, 2009), a recent popular history book on the mass rapes. The author states that his work ‘is not a history of the Second World War but merely describes the suffering of women and girls who were never involved in the crimes of others’ (von Münch, 2010). Such invocations of the innocent (female) victim are, of course, not new. Their persistence indicates, however, the disconnect between cultural memory and historical scholarship, which has demonstrated the multitude of ways in which women directly and indirectly supported National Socialism and the war effort (in this context see Heineman, 2005). Cultural memory does not preserve the past in its complexities but promotes the version of history with the most symbolic and emotional capital at any given moment (Assmann, 2006: 58). In the first post-war decades, (feminized) memories of wartime victimhood in fact underpinned a ‘a public memory that permitted West Germans to acknowledge the war as part of their history and at the same time to distance themselves from the National Socialist state’ (Moeller, 2001: 3). Narratives of collective victimhood promoted social solidarity and provided a less destructive basis for reframing national identity than memories of prejudice and perpetration.

Through her characterization of the architect’s wife, Erpenbeck undermines predominant ideological scripts that evoke mass rape as a paradigm of the innocent suffering of the German nation, thereby glossing over other aspects of women’s experience of the Third Reich. The indifference of the architect’s wife towards Jewish suffering make her complicit in the success of the Nazi regime and the crimes it was able to perpetrate as a
result. These facts do not refute her status as victim of war but they do invalidate her moral and political guiltlessness. The melancholy tone of the chapter that narrates the woman’s perspective ensures that Erpenbeck does not downplay the pain of the German woman who encountered sexual violence, even as she raises difficult questions about the historical preliminaries that led to this suffering. The complex form of *Heimsuchung* allows Erpenbeck to further deconstruct this popular memory script based on rigid conceptions of victimhood and perpetration. The novel revisits the story of rape several chapters later, this time from the perspective of the soldier, who lost his entire family to German terror. In this chapter, Erpenbeck reconstructs the chain of events that ended in violence against German civilians. This chapter also evokes several common explanations for the aggression of the Red Army. For example, the soldier reflects on the anger of his peers at the violence and arrogance of the Germans, who had conquered and destroyed a much poorer nation despite their wealth at home. Erpenbeck thus directs attention to the perpetrator as individual, who often disappears from national rape scripts that focus on the collective dimensions of the crime and obfuscate questions of agency (see Henry, 2016: 45; Clark, 2014: 467).

The officer finds the architect’s wife when his troop sets up camp at her home. He is alerted to her presence by the sounds emanating from the walk-in wardrobe where she has been holed up since the arrival of the Red Army. As the soldier fumbles in the dark, his hands unintentionally brush against her breasts and he begins to kiss her when she struggles. The uncertainty of the youthful, sexually inexperienced soldier suggests that he is following a script that he has seen his peers play out on their journey across Germany. His apparent reluctance to enact this script is indicated above all by his cry into the dark, ‘mama’, which
projects on to the woman an identity that she has never desired (p. 75). This is the word that drills a hole in the woman’s eternity, binding her symbolically to the cycle of life and death that she has sought to evade through dreams of travel and adventure. That damaging word captures her symbolic status in the eyes of the male figure and in the cultural imaginary. It seeks to fix her in a manner that she has resisted her entire life. It seems to be this subjective injury, above all, that triggers the movements of the architect’s wife who begins to guide and then apparently dominate the uncertain soldier, forcing his face between her thighs and then urinating on him ‘just the way his men urinated on the painted door in the entryway below, and so she too is waging war, or is this love, the soldier doesn’t know’ (p. 75). As Beth Linklater (2001) insightfully suggests, rape narratives that blur the boundaries between sexual violence and seduction raise ‘crucial questions as to whose meaning is attached to the act of sexual violence’ (p. 262). Erpenbeck alludes to the significance of interpretation when she draws the violent scene to a close with the comment, ‘in fact all he did was open a closet’ (p. 78). The apologetic tone of this remark indicates that the soldier’s retrospective construction of the woman as seductress may well be a ‘fantasy of consent’ through which he attempts to integrate his actions ‘into a bearable narrative of the self’. This is a common strategy in perpetrator narratives, as Johanna Bourke (2007) notes in her recent study on sexual violence (p. 14). Erpenbeck’s difficult mnemographic intervention thus encourages reflection on complex matters such as perspective and interpretation that are smoothed over and oftentimes disavowed in conventional memory scripts.

Erpenbeck exposes the assumptions and prejudices that underpin these national memory scripts. The rapist is neither driven by primitive sexual urges nor by misogynistic
or atavistic attitudes towards women, as contemporary commentators had suggested was true of the Red Army in 1945 (see Moeller, 2001: 66). Erpenbeck suggests that regressive attitudes towards women were in fact more common in Germany than in the Soviet Union. Her soldier contrasts the pornographic images of women that he encounters in German magazines and the mosaics in the town hall where he grew up, which depicted ‘women with sheaves of grain in their arms, young students holding up test tubes in their hands, and mothers with babies’ (p. 77). At first glance, Erpenbeck thus perpetuates the inscription of women’s bodies as a site where cultural conflicts are played out. However, she ultimately questions the validity of hierarchical notions of difference by invoking contradictory narratives about women and violence that posit Germany and then Russia as culturally and morally superior. The war imagery dominant in the passage describing the sexual encounter between the soldier and the architect’s wife also serves to minimize the differences between the two nations and equalize the power balance between them. Erpenbeck graphically describes ‘victory grinding itself against defeat, defeat against victory, and sweat and juices between the peoples and spurting, spurting until all life has been spurted out, the final cry the same in all languages’ (p. 78). The hierarchical binaries of self and other upon which nationalist rape metaphors depend are dislodged here.

Even the first version of the rape scene, narrated from the perspective of the architect’s wife, conjures up the dissolution of the boundary between self and other. At one point the woman muses that she had ‘finally joined forces with the enemy’ during her encounter with the soldier (p. 54). The concomitant suggestion that raped women had somehow betrayed their nation was not uncommon in the aftermath of war, condensed in
pointed aphorisms such as ‘German soldiers fought six years. The German woman, five minutes’ (zur Nieden, 2002: 303). Two assumptions underlie such remarks: first, the idea that German women consented to and even enjoyed their encounters with Allied forces and, second, the notion that their sexual behaviour amounted to a moral and national transgression. Dagmar Herzog (2005) has compellingly shown that in the immediate aftermath of war women’s sexual behaviour was often framed in terms of a larger moral crisis resulting from National Socialism (p. 73). The discussion of Germany’s dishonour and shame in terms of women’s sexuality reflected wider discursive attempts to redirect moral debate ‘away from the problem of complicity in mass murder and toward a narrowed conception of morality as solely concerned with sex’ (Herzog, 2005: 1; see also Heineman, 1996: 381). Alluding to a variety of conflicting post-war interpretations of sexual violence and female sexuality, the representation of sexual violence in Heimsuchung is wholly overdetermined. Erpenbeck thus indicates how problematic it is ‘to compress the complexities and nuances of wartime rape into a monocausal frame’ that ultimately produces inflexible models of victimhood and perpetration (Clarke, 2014: 462). While Erpenbeck’s novel reveals much about the problem of interpreting wartime rape, the responses to it illuminate how naturalized certain readings have become. The remainder of this article will explore how literature can help us understand the gender-political implications of such national memory scripts.

The Gender Politics of Memory
No matter the angle from which we consider the second representation of sexual violence in *Heimsuchung*, it is undeniably provocative and makes for uncomfortable reading. The second scene is sexually explicit, appeals to the abject through references to excrement, and provides no comfortable position for identification and interpretation. Given the visceral reaction it provokes, it is perhaps not surprising that reviewers glossed over this disruptive and difficult scene. Journalist Rainer Moritz (2008) blithely labels the apparent shift from rape to erotic encounter a ‘literary pièce de résistance’ without reflecting on the intention or effect. In his reading, the historical fact of wartime rape has become literary. The subsequent hermeneutic short-circuiting evinces William Beatty Warner’s (1983) impression that aesthetic processes ‘considerably complicate’ our approach to textual violence by multiplying the possible responses to it and potentially muting the critical impulse of the reader (p. 32). This risk is exemplified in another review of *Heimsuchung*, in which Alexander Cammann (2008) affirms that ‘the fate of the architect’s wife is, of course, sealed well before she is taken by the Red Army soldier’. Clearly these reviews do not do justice to Erpenbeck’s engagement with the mass rapes, above all her attempts to represent both the soldier and the German woman as agents and show that wartime rape is not an inevitable aspect of war but part of a wider history of political and sexual violence. Cammann’s gloss of the provocative scene bears out the feminist thesis that ‘the metaphor of territorial conquest as rape or sexual conquest has been in wide circulation in the west for so long that it has become “naturalized,” nothing to pass comment on or even to notice’ (Hooper, 2001: 139). The frequency with which this paradigm goes unquestioned in narratives about wartime rape reveals much about the relationship between
gender and memory politics. After all, the cultural memory of wartime rape reflects the assumptions about gender roles and sexual violence that circulate in a given society. It may indeed consolidate them. Critical memory discourses therefore play an important role in contesting a social imaginary that construes women as always already victims. Producing differentiated accounts of wartime rape is vital since naturalizing and legitimizing attitudes to sexual violence (condensed in the aphorism ‘boys will be boys’) are commonly associated with the phenomenon of conflict.

Naturalized readings of wartime rape, such as those projected on to Erpenbeck’s novel, exacerbate an issue that inheres in the trope of national rape, that is, an indifference towards the realities of sexual violence for those who experience it. The value of literary works as rich and self-reflexive as Heimsuchung lies in their ability to produce a semantic clash that distinguishes the figurative from the real and that thereby encourages the reader to question the validity of the symbolic processes through which they become conflated. A figurative reading of Heimsuchung may follow multiple paths, interpreting the encounter between the architect’s wife and the soldier as a symbol of violence done to her husband or to the German nation, for example. In each case, the directionality of the metonym or metaphor deflects from the ‘vehicle’ (the architect’s wife) and emphasizes instead the ‘tenor’ (the husband or nation). In a narrative that develops the metaphorical overdetermination of sexual violence almost ad absurdum, Erpenbeck points up the possibility, if not inevitability, of figurative appropriation, revealing something of the discursive black hole that sexual violence seems to conjure up. This is one of the ways in which ‘literary (rape) narratives both give answers to the questions they pose and produce
“deformed” answers to the historical questions they steer away from. Thus reading rape also involves deciphering the “symptoms” of a problem struggling to be posed’ (Sielke, 2002: 6). *Heimsuchung* and its reception expose the discomfort caused by rape, which generates ever-new attempts to understand, explain, and rationalize this crime.

What is more, the potential shift of attention, and indeed sympathy, away from the victim in Erpenbeck’s novel begs the question of the responsibility of the critic, the historian, the politician, or the feminist to refuse to chase the spiralling tropes that obscure empirical violence, tropes that this article has shown are doubtless inviting. For this reason, Bal (2012) conceptualizes allegory not merely as a rhetorical figure but as a ‘historical reading attitude … that isolates the event from its own history in order to place it within a different one; it is an act of displacement and reframing’ in which the reader plays an active role (p. 227). The responsibility therefore lies with the reader to keep alive and question the validity of violent tropes. This practice aligns with what Sarah Ahmed (1998) calls an ‘ethics of closer reading’ that is receptive to the structuring effects of a text ‘in such a way that those effects become questionable rather than simply traced in the process of reading’ (p. 17). Such a mode of reading can and should be extended beyond the realm of literature. As this article has demonstrated, tropes of national rape are informed by a variety of social and political discourses about gender and national identity, assumptions that are reaffirmed by a cultural memory that recognizes wartime rape primarily in its collective and symbolic dimensions. In view of the mutual imbrication of gender and memory politics, it is vital that we deconstruct tropes of national rape, challenge the presumptions on which they depend for articulation, and expand on them to create more complex and individualized memory
narratives. Such an ethical approach to mnemography is necessary in order to counter a widespread tendency in memory studies to ‘conceive of memory as an entity of symbols without actions’ (Confino and Fritzsche, 2002: 4).

Literary writing can offer a model for such a ‘mnemographic ethics’ by revealing assumptions about and reactions to violence through the plot in which tropes are embedded. Literature gives emotional and conceptual depth to the tropes it employs and animates. Frequently historical fiction also foregrounds the symbolic character of practices of remembering and interpreting that are naturalized in other discursive realms. To take *Heimsuchung* as an example, the representation of sexual violence may be overdetermined, and so symbolically dense that it produces a proliferating number of figurative readings, but the novel also emphasizes the processes of reading and reasoning that have gone into its construction. Texts such as *Heimsuchung* ‘not only underline how our understanding of rape depends upon the traditions and aesthetics of representations of rape. They also reveal … the ideologies circulated by the rhetoric of rape’ – and their very real consequences (Sielke, 2004: 381). Through the individual stories she tells, Erpenbeck reveals tensions between collective and individual, symbolic and real, narratives of wartime sexual violence. Erpenbeck’s narrative reminds us, for example, that conceptualizations of victimhood as symbolic identity category deny the agency and subjectivity of the victimized individual. In *Heimsuchung*, the metaphorical association of women with the cherished *Heimat*, with the home, owned by one man and occupied by another, and the land, ploughed by a third, characterizes rape as trespass and invasion — not primarily as violence against a woman but rather as an affront against the men to whom she belongs. The language used in fact
articulates the violence against the woman in terms of the damage that it does to her husband’s sense of her. When her bodily boundaries are penetrated, so too is her status as symbol of eternity and thereby the symbolic function that she fulfils for her husband. Arguably, in the more detailed description of the violent encounter that comes two chapters later, we can see the architect’s wife rebelling against the process of symbolization. She fights back against being labelled ‘mama’, that is, against being construed as a vehicle for the satisfaction of male desires and fantasies, on the one hand, and as a symbol of national virtue, reproduction, and passivity, on the other.

Through internal focalization, Erpenbeck writes against the grain of nationalist narratives that gloss over the personal meanings of sexual violence. Variations on the visceral metaphor of the drill invite the reader to imagine and reconstruct the emotional response of the architect’s wife, which is primarily evoked through symbolism and allusion. As art historian Jill Bennett (2005) has argued, imagery evoking the ruptured boundaries of the skin preserves the traumatic past as sense memory, ‘as sensation rather than representation’ (p. 42). The violent sexual metaphor of the drill evokes the hole that etymologically grounds the idea of trauma, a word with roots in the Greek, Persian, and Sanskrit word ‘tere’ meaning ‘open hole’ (Wilson and Lindy, 2013: 35). Trauma here evokes ‘the rupturing of the subject’s capacity to regulate its own sense of embodiment’ (Stevens, 2011: 171). As Probst (2010) argues, the body of the architect’s wife therefore becomes legible as a site of memory, if not a memento mori (p. 76). The fact that the encounter with the Soviet officer coincides with the woman’s menopause further anchors traumatic memory in the body. Menopause redoubles the effect of rape as a form of what
Louise du Toit (2009) calls a ‘spirit injury’ that transforms the victim’s relationship to the world and to her own body, which becomes ‘a dead weight of flesh, a mortal, vulnerable, breakable thing that obstructs, exposes, and threatens her rather than shelters and enables her agency in the world’ (p. 84). Together rape and menopause disrupt the woman’s subjective sense of temporality, which appears increasingly at odds with the monumental time of history. Plotting subjective experience against history in this way, Erpenbeck produces an individualized account of rape by showing how one woman’s experience of violence is filtered through her ongoing sense of alienation from her own body during the menopause.

The oblique language indicates the protagonist’s inability to face up to her trauma, capturing its belatedness, the ‘ever-surprising fact that trauma is not experienced as a mere repression or defence, but as a temporal delay that carries the individual beyond the shock of the first moment’ (Caruth, 1995: 10). This passage also implies that the woman’s personal reaction has been delayed and moulded by social circumstances, not least other hardships she might have faced after the war (Grossmann, 1995: 53). For some, the process of working through the experience of rape may also have been deferred or blocked by the lack of public space available for the victims to remember their experience. In cultural memory, the experience of individual women tends to be less important than the national narratives of loss and sacrifice into which they are commonly subsumed. And so, while the emotional and ideological appeal of the trope of national rape was widely exploited in post-war Germany, the rights and needs of the women who experienced sexual violence received limited political recognition. Over the course of the 1950s, the Law on Compensation for
Damages Due to Military Occupation (‘Gesetz über die Abgeltung von Besatzungsschäden’) was extended so that women could apply for financial support for children born of rape (Gebhardt, 2016: 224-33). As women had to prove that they had been sexually assaulted by an Allied soldier, however, few were able to benefit from this provision. Many women struggled to make credible their victimhood in the context of a society that ‘ascribed a lax sexual morality even to victims of rape and tended to blame them for their fate’ (Gebhardt, 2016: 224).

The reception of wartime rape in Germany affirms the need to challenge ideological narratives that treat victimhood as a moral identity category. When the diary Eine Frau in Berlin (A Woman in Berlin) was first published anonymously in Germany in 1959, for example, the author was accused of ‘besmirching the honour of German women’ (Beevor, 2005: xv; see also Heineman, 2005: 56). The author describes her experience of the end of World War II using gallows humour and an unsentimental narrative style that alienated the original German audience. The approach of the diary clashed with the sentimental tone of dominant memory scripts in West Germany, which were further undermined by the author’s nuanced portrayal of the Red Army and reference to German crimes in the East (Garraio, 2012: 41). Equally unpalatable were her damning portrait of wartime masculinities and frank admission that she had sought out a high-ranking lover in exchange for food and protection. The author reflects for multiple pages on whether this fact makes her a prostitute and why she so readily associates this profession with moral depravity. Her disentanglement of sex and morality did not find favour with the reading public, which showed little sympathy for the complexities of consent and sexual integrity in times of
conflict. Reviewing the early responses to the diary, moreover, Birgit Dahlke (2001) suggests that the author’s portrayal of women taking control in desperate circumstances was an affront to the petit bourgeois morality of the time that denied women (sexual) agency (p. 204). The anonymous account was incompatible with an authorized narrative of female victimization that obfuscated the complex realities of war and occupation — above all, the blurred lines between rape, prostitution, and sexual affairs that may indeed only have been consensual because, at the time, women judged them necessary in order to obtain food, shelter, and protection for themselves and their families. Considered this way, women in 1945 Germany may have been victims of their circumstances, but they were also agents (Grossmann, 1995: 54).

The extent to which attitudes to gender, sexuality, and women’s roles in war have shifted in the meantime became clear in 2003, when the diary was warmly received upon republication. The ground had been prepared for renewed engagement with the mass rapes by a number of ‘memory contests’ in the preceding decade about the version of the German past that should inform the identity of Reunified Germany (Fuchs and Cosgrove 2006: 2). The themes of Eine Frau in Berlin resonated in a culture keen to ‘rediscover’ the suffering of the past. The diary nevertheless became the subject of intense discussion when Jens Bisky (2003) revealed that the author was in fact Marta Hiller, a journalist who had written propagandistic articles during the Third Reich. As Cohen-Pfister (2012) remarks, however, the ensuing debate was focused on the ethics of ‘outing’ the author and the authenticity of the diary (p. 329). To twenty-first century readers, Hiller’s complicity did not seem particularly remarkable, nor did her decision to focus on her experience of victimhood
rather than her complicity with the Nazi regime. For Heineman (2005), the fact that critics were much more interested in the author’s powerful story of suffering and survival suggests the ‘continuing ambivalence of Germans’ thinking about racially privileged women’s past’ (p. 56).

There are signs that Eine Frau in Berlin prompted a more nuanced engagement with women’s experience of sexual violence during the war. Reviews praised the author for bravely exploring the blurred lines between rape and barter sex (Garraio, 2012: 43). The fact that the novel appeared on the best-seller list for almost a year indicates an increased sensitivity towards the complexities of sexual violence in conflict and for the systemic causes of prostitution. In the meantime, novels such as Franck’s Die Mittagsfrau (2007), Gerlof’s Alle Zeit (2009), and Draesner’s Sieben Sprünge vom Rand der Welt (2014) have begun to explore the contiguity of political victimhood and complicity through female protagonists’ sexual experiences during and after the war, all the while deconstructing stereotypes of female victimhood by providing a differentiated account both of women’s vulnerability and their possibilities for agency.

Erpenbeck’s novel can thus be seen as part of a wider feminist project to ‘reconceptualize and reappropriate the word victimization and its meaning’ (Mardorossian, 2002: 771). Erpenbeck’s shocking and uncomfortable inversion of a cliché forces confrontation not only with the realities of sexual violence in conflict but also with entrenched assumptions about victims and perpetrators. In Heimsuchung, she challenges patriarchal frameworks that circumscribe who can be classed a victim based on moralistic
gender ideals. After all, the architect’s wife does not match up to the ideal of the pure and passive rape victim. Sorcha Gunne and Zoë Brigley Thompson (2012) aver that literary rape narratives of this kind have the potential to disturb common cultural attitudes to rape, in particular by unlocking binary oppositions such as bad and innocent, powerful and passive, complicit and resistant that still dominate debates about sexual violence in a variety of political contexts (p. 11). After all, as Jelke Boesten (2014) argues, social understandings of violence against women ‘transcend the terms “war” and “peace”’ (p. 5). Boesten (2014) therefore insists that institutional attempts to address, remember, and combat wartime rape cannot be effective unless they ‘openly challenge the normative understandings of gender, race, and class that underpin violence against women in the first place’ (p. 145). This is the task of ‘mnemographic ethics’. Attempting to translate difficult memories into aesthetic form, literary narratives like Heimsuchung provide a model for such an ethics by revealing the cultural systems of meaning that dominant mnemonic signifiers mask. They challenge the assumptions upon which these signifiers rest and expand on them to produce more complex and individualized memory narratives.

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\* Some believe that the figure could be as high as 1.9 million (Johr, 1992: 58). It is impossible to know the exact number as historical records are either missing or incomplete. In any case, these records would only document cases that were reported to
military or medical authorities. See Gebhardt (2016) for a comprehensive discussion of the difficulty of quantifying the extent of mass rape in Germany (p. 23).

ii This article is indebted to previous research by Grossmann (1995), Heineman (1996, 2005), Dahlke (2007), Cohen-Pfister (2012), and Garraio (2010, 2012, 2013), who comprehensively historicize public discourse surrounding wartime rape in the Federal Republic of Germany, the German Democratic Republic, and the Berlin Republic. It would be beyond the scope of this article to provide more than a cursory summary of this discourse history.

iii Unless otherwise stated, all translations from the German are mine.

iv As Garraio (2010) and Dahlke (2007) show, wartime rape has also been used as a metaphor for various other political phenomena, including the post-war realities of East and West Germany and failed processes of Vergangenheitsbewältigung.

v This is the title of a report on flight and expulsion from Pomerania by Christian Graf von Krockow (1988). See also historical scholarship by Möding (1988) and Heineman (1996).

vi This is not a new discourse, as Julia Garraio (2013) shows in her analysis of a number of widely-read texts published in the 1950s and 1960s.

vii Red Army officers describe their encounters with German women as seduction in narratives discussed by Krimmer (2015a: 86) and Jacobs (2008: 8). On misogynistic attitudes towards women within the Red Army and in Soviet discussions of rape, see also Merridale (2005: 340) and Bischl (2012: 117-33).

viii The matter of interpretation is also crucial to the other instances of sexual violence depicted in Heimsuchung. In the chapter ‘The Wealthy Father and his four Daughters’, we
learn that Klara has a mental breakdown and presumably commits suicide after an ambiguous encounter with a fisherman. These consequences are the only clues as to the potentially sinister nature of this meeting, which is not witnessed and therefore goes unrecognized. In a later chapter ‘The Childhood Friend’, two young protagonists witness a friend sexually assault his female cousin. They fail to intervene or report what they have seen. Erpenbeck thus emphasizes the entanglement of interpretation and social recognition.

ix In such moments, Erpenbeck’s ‘nostalgia for the unrealized utopian potential of the socialist dream’ shines through in her chronicle of historical setbacks (Fuchs, 2012: 130). See also Cosgrove (2012).

xi Such works attempt to move beyond the shortcomings of earlier feminist analyses viewing wartime rape as a near universal expression of patriarchal aggression, an interpretative frame that tended to emphasize women’s victimization at the expense of closer discussion of their possibilities for agency (see Bos, 2006: 999).

References


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