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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

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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an excerpt from her unpublished novel, Heimsuchung, at the Alfred Döblin literary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.ii

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

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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

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reading for 'deliberate "effrontery" ..., precisely because it does not draw on the cliché of

the German woman raped by a Soviet soldier'. iii 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 Trimçev (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

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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.

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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.

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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-

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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

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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

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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). iv 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

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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. vi 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

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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

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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). vii 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. viii

Erpenbeck exposes the assumptions and prejudices that underpin these national

memory scripts. The rapist is neither driven by primitive sexual urges nor by misogynistic

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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). ix 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

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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** 

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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

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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

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"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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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). x 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

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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.

<sup>1</sup> 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

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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).

<sup>11</sup> 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.

of widely-read texts published in the 1950s and 1960s.

- 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*.
- 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).
   This is not a new discourse, as Julia Garraio (2013) shows in her analysis of a number
- 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).

<sup>x</sup> 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).

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