AND YOU SHALL TELL YOUR CHILDREN: THE INTERSECTION OF MEMORY, IDENTITY, AND NARRATIVE IN CONTEMPORARY GERMAN JEWISH AUTOFICTION

A Dissertation
submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
In German

By

Doria Beth Killian, M.A.

Washington, DC
August 7, 2019
Copyright 2019 by Doria Beth Killian
All Rights Reserved
AND YOU SHALL TELL YOUR CHILDREN: THE INTERSECTION OF MEMORY, IDENTITY, AND NARRATIVE IN CONTEMPORARY GERMAN JEWISH AUTOFICTION

Doria Beth Killian, M.A.

Thesis Advisor: Friederike Eigler, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the autofictional works of three Jewish women writing in German, combining a close textual analysis with a narratological framework in order to understand how narrative, storytelling, and writing are used at both the diegetic and meta-levels to negotiate familial and cultural memory and to construct a contemporary German Jewish identity. The works analyzed herein—Barbara Honigmann’s *Roman von einem Kinde* (1986), *Damals, dann und danach* (1999), and *Ein Kapitel aus meinem Lebens* (2004); Gila Lustiger’s *So sind wir* (2005); and Katja Petrowskaja’s *Vielleicht Esther* (2015)—are all written by second- or third-generation post-Holocaust Jews whose familial pasts include stories of exile, deportation, and internment, and whose individual presents are marked by trauma, intergenerational silence, and multiplex identities. As they navigate these heavy subjects, interweaving stories of their parents’ and grandparents’ lives alongside tales from their own childhoods and contemporary lives, each of these authors also thematizes narrative itself, rendering storytelling, writing, and literature as significant to these works as the stories and anecdotes contained within them. Using memory theory from a variety of scholars to examine this thematization of narrative and its connection to memory, identity, and family dynamics, I argue that, rather than being used to merely recount the past, narrative in these works becomes the very site in which familial and individual identity is constructed and construed. In addition, each chapter also centers on a narratological element that is particularly salient in each of the three authors’ work, specifically: plot/narrativity,
metanarration, and intertextuality. I then relate the thematization of narrative at the diegetic level to the author’s own construction of narrative at the meta-level, using feminist narratological scholarship to explore the interrelation of content and form. This dissertation serves to further the ongoing scholarly conversation on memory, identity, and belonging in relation to contemporary German Jewish life and, in its conception of narrative as contingent on cultural context rather than as proceeding from universal norms, also contributes to postclassical feminist narratology and works to broaden our understanding of the role of narrative in human life.
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the amazing team of professors and scholars of the Georgetown University German Department. As an undergraduate, you introduced me to the culture and language of Germany, but, perhaps more importantly, you also helped me develop a keen and open mind that has been instrumental in anything I’ve ever achieved since my first German class in the spring of 2008. I’d also like to thank the members of my committee in particular, Friederike Eigler, Mary Helen Dupree, and Katrin Sieg. Only with the benefit of your encouragement, insight, and feedback was I able to complete this dissertation. Special thanks are also reserved for Marianna Pankova, who was the first person to convince me I could handle graduate school in the first place and whose unwavering support over the years has been invaluable.

I am further indebted to my many friends and family members who have provided me with fortitude, reassurance, and kindness throughout my studies: my mother, Linda Killian; my siblings Holland, Stephen, Audra, and Blair; my fellow graduate students, Noelle Rettig and Emily Sieg Barthold; and the light of our department, Courtney Feldman, whose work I have disrupted nearly every day for the last four years.

Lastly, I am unendingly grateful to Betsy Sciavolino, who has given me more support, encouragement, guidance, wisdom, and love than I ever thought possible.
# Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1 And You Shall Tell Your Children: An Introduction................................................. 1
  i. German Jewish Culture and Literature After 1945 .......................................................... 9
  ii. German Jews and Generational Divides ....................................................................... 15
  iii. Theories of Memory and Transmission ....................................................................... 21
  iv. Life Writing from Autobiography to Autofiction ......................................................... 26
  v. At the Intersection of Narrative and Identity .............................................................. 29
  vi. Dissertation Overview ................................................................................................. 34

CHAPTER 2 We Belong at our Writing Desks: Identity, Writing, and Plot in Barbara Honigmann’s Autofiction ................................................................. 39
  i. Plot and Plotlessness in the Works of Barbara Honigmann........................................... 42
  ii. Narrative Structure from Plot to Narrativity ............................................................... 48
  iii. Constructing Identity through Text ............................................................................ 57
  iv. The Genres of Memory ............................................................................................... 64
  v. Plot, Birth, and Possibility .......................................................................................... 74

CHAPTER 3 The Emotion Chronicler of Our Family: Memory, Storytelling, and Metanarration in Gila Lustiger’s So sind wir ................................................................. 79
  i. Masculinity, Jewishness, and Silence: The First Memory Knot..................................... 83
  ii. Femininity, Israel, and Communication: The Second Memory Knot........................... 94
  iii. The Last Two Memory Knots: Disrupting the Binary................................................. 104
  iv. A Textual Simulation of Oral Storytelling .................................................................. 116

CHAPTER 4 In the Cleft of Languages: Belonging, Reading, and Intertextuality in Katja Petrowskaja’s Vielleicht Esther ................................................................. 130
  i. Institutionalized Memory Spaces and their Intercultural Discontents.......................... 132
  ii. Weaving Webs of Belonging ....................................................................................... 150
  iii. Intertexts in Context .................................................................................................. 160
  iv. Reading Jewishness Intertextually ............................................................................. 173

CONCLUSION ......................................................................................................................... 182

APPENDIX List of Intertexts in Katja Petrowskaja’s Vielleicht Esther ................................. 190

BIBLIOGRAPHY ...................................................................................................................... 192
CHAPTER 1  

And You Shall Tell Your Children:  
An Introduction

In the title story of her 1986 debut work, Roman von einem Kinde, German Jewish author Barbara Honigmann juxtaposes two births. The first is literal—that of her son, but the second is a figurative birth. The narrator recounts her experience attending the Passover Seder at East Berlin’s only synagogue. She knows few of the generally older Jews, and though ethnically Jewish, she is not normally observant, leading her to feel an odd mixture of being both “fremd” and “doch willkommen.”¹ In the course of the story, the Seder comes to signal a shift in the narrator’s Jewish identity from an assimilated German unversed in Jewish tradition to a practicing and learned member of the Jewish community. It is, in essence, the story of her birth as a Jew, rendering the ambiguity of the German title doubly meaningful. In this interpretation, “Roman von einem Kinde” is both the story of a child (the narrator’s son) and by a child (the narrator herself).

That this second, figurative birth occurs at a Passover Seder is symbolically significant, as the holiday ritual is structured around a biblical imperative that compels the intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge: “And you shall tell your children on that day: ‘It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came forth out of Egypt.” This Torah verse, Exodus 13:8, is fulfilled in the course of the Seder as the older generations tell the Passover story—that of Moses leading the Israelites out of enslavement in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land—to the youngest generation.² Notably, the story is told as if the parents and grandparents had themselves suffered under Egyptian bondage (“what the Lord did for me when I came forth out of Egypt [emphasis added]”) and children are similarly encouraged to place themselves in this narrative

¹ Barbara Honigmann, Roman von einem Kinde (Darmstadt: Luchterhand Verlag, 1986), 24.
² Exodus 13:8 Tanakh
position when listening to the story, as the narrator of Honigmann’s tale does: “und ich nahm ein Buch wie die anderen und schlug es von hinten auf und blätterte rückwärts und stieg mit den anderen zurück bis in die alte Zeit in Ägypten.” Acculturation into this ritual and into the wider Jewish community is thereby accomplished by transmitting cultural memory through storytelling.

The importance of stories and narratives in Jewish culture extends well beyond the Seder, however. The name of the text from which the Passover story is read, the Haggadah, is in fact the same word used to describe the larger tradition of storytelling, including folklore, historical anecdotes, moral exhortations, and more, that comprises one half of the Talmudic and Midrashic Jewish exegetical tradition. The other half, halakha, concerns legal issues and logical proofs. In Hebrew, haggadah simply means “telling,” but its Aramaic root ḥgḍא carries three additional meanings: “expanding, drawing out;” “binding, drawing in;” and “flow.” This etymological web indicates the tripartite role storytelling plays in the Talmud: expanding the comprehension of the text, strengthening religious and communal connection, and transmitting culture and ideas. While haggadah and its multiplex functions pertained originally only to classic rabbinic writings, its expansion into more secular and mainstream forms of Jewish literature had been noted as early as 1886, in Gustav Karpeles’s Geschichte der jüdischen Literatur, the first comprehensive treatment of the history of Jewish literature in any language. Karpeles asserts that, despite their mutual origin in the “Urquell der Bibel,” when traced through time, halakha and haggada eventually separate into “das Gebiet der Wissenschaft” and the “Sphären der Poesie.” He then comments on the curious similarities between rabbinic- and modern-era Jewish writing when he states, “Derselbe

3 Ibid.
4 Marcus Jastrow, Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and Midrashic Literature. (Leipzig: W. Drugulin, 1903), 10; 330.
5 Gustav Karpeles, Geschichte der jüdischen Literatur, 2nd ed. (Berlin: M. Poppelauer, 1909), 443.
Grundton, der aus der Haggada der alten Zeit, aus den Sagen des Midrasch und den Legenden des Talmuds herausklingt, zieht auch durch die moderne Haggada, wenn man diese poetische Strömung der neuen Zeit so nennen darf.”

More than a hundred years later, contemporary Jewish writers and literary critics would take Karpeles’s argument a step further: it is not simply that a continuity exists in Jewish culture between older, religious texts and modern, often secular texts, they argue, but that this enduring, unrelenting preoccupation with texts is indeed the only continuity in Jewish culture. In a 2012 book coauthored with his daughter, historian Fania Oz-Salzburger, the late Jewish Israeli author Amos Oz states that “Jewish continuity has always hinged on […] written words, on an expanding maze of interpretations, debates, disagreements, and on a unique human rapport.” “Ours is not a bloodline,” Oz and Oz-Salzburger write, “but a textline.”

Eight years later, American Jewish literary critic Adam Kirsch echoes this sentiment in the preface to his anthology of fundamental Jewish texts: “it is true that for most of Jewish history, books were not just one element in Jewish culture; they were the core of that culture, the binding force that sustained a civilization.” As Kirsch explains, between the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE and the founding of the State of Israel in 1948, the Jewish people lacked any sort of homeland and subject to the tumultuous sociopolitical forces of Christian and Muslim rulers. Jewish identity and belonging, then, could not be rooted in any physical ground, as it would have to be ripped up and replanted elsewhere when the vagaries of history forced them, once again, to relocate and disperse. If there was to be

---

6 Ibid., 444.
8 Ibid.
any continuity to Jewish identity, it would have to be cultivated in something that could travel with them and could exist in many disparate locations at once. Thus, the history of Jewish culture cannot “be told primarily in political terms,” but instead as “a history of books.”

As evidenced by Karpeles’s 1886 German-language treatise on the subject, this connection between texts and notions of Jewish identity and belonging seems to have found particular purchase among German Jews, perhaps due to the cultural overlap between the Jewish relationship to the text and the self-conception of Germans as inhabiting the Land der Dichter und Denker. In his autobiographical Geständnisse, the Jewish-born Heinrich Heine, who reluctantly converted to Protestantism as an “Entre Billet zur europäischen Kultur,” refers to the Torah as the “portatives Vaterland” of the Jews. Over time, this portable fatherland would become less and less religious and scriptural, but remain as textual as ever, with numerous German Jews expressing their conceptions of identity and belonging in purely literary terms. Nearly a century after Heine, the German-speaking Sephardic Jew Elias Canetti, states in his 1935 novel Die Blendung, “Die beste Definition der Heimat ist Bibliothek.” The Polish German Jewish literary critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki similarly writes, “So habe ich keine Heimat und kein Vaterland. Aber ich beklage mich nicht. Denn letztlich bin ich doch kein heimatloser, schon gar nicht ein wurzelloser Mensch. [...] So habe auch ich ein eigenes Land, ein ‘portatives Vaterland’, eine Heimat, und nicht die schlechteste: die Literatur, genauer, die deutsche Literatur.”

---

10 Ibid., xii.
authors writing in German in the early half of the twentieth century swelled to unprecedented numbers, including in its broad spectrum Else Laske-Schüler, Alfred Döblin, Martin Buber, Stefan Zweig, Franz Kafka, Max Brod, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Toller, Arthur Schnitzler, Joseph Roth, and Gershom Scholem.

This prolific era of what would later come to be known as the German-Jewish symbiosis would however come to an end in the middle of that century, with the overwhelming destruction of European Jewry by Nazi Germany. In many ways, the Holocaust represents a caesura in German Jewish culture. For many Jews in the postwar years, it was not only unimaginable to live in Germany, but also unacceptable. In 1948, at its first postwar congress in Montreux, Switzerland, the World Jewish Congress passed a resolution stressing “the determination of the Jewish people never again to settle on the bloodstained soil of Germany.”

Philosopher Günther Anders proclaimed his generation of German Jews the last: “Nach uns kommt keiner mehr, der sich als deutscher Jude bezeichen und fühlen oder gar in die deutsche Geschichte eingehen wird.” Going even further, Gershom Scholem argued that the Holocaust not only represented the definitive end to the German-Jewish symbiosis, but also revealed that this symbiosis had been an illusion from the very start. In a 1962 essay, he calls the German Jews’ infatuation with German culture “ein[en] wahre[n] Schrei ins Leere,” and writes that “das Ganze jenes gespenstischen deutsch-jüdischen Gespräches sich in solchem leeren Raum des Fiktiven abspielte.” With the end of the German-Jewish symbiosis, writers and literary critics also prophesied the end of German Jewish literature. Reich-Ranicki, so emphatic about his personal relationship to German literature, is much less

---

sanguine in his declaration that the chapter of German Jewish literature was “abgeschlossen, endgültig und unwiderruflich.”16 The same sentiment is reflected in a 1985 preface written by Siegmund Kaznelson to a collection of poems titled *Jüdisches Schicksal in deutschen Gedichten: Eine abschließende Anthologie*. “Diese Sammlung wird als ‘abschließend bezeichnet,’” Kaznelson writes, “nicht nur weil sie eine tausendjährige Geschichtsperiode abschließt, sondern weil nach menschlichem Ermessen die deutschsprachige Dichtung jüdischer Inhalts mit unserer oder vielleicht mit der nächsten Generation zu Ende geht.”17

Yet this presaged extinction of German Jewish culture and its literature never came to pass. Despite the determination and conviction that no Jews could or would ever make Germany their home again, today—some seventy years after the end of World War II—Germany’s Jewish population rests around 250,000.18 One can only imagine how much it would astonish and possibly even bewilder Gershom Scholem or Siegmund Kaznelson to learn that there are currently three rabbinical seminaries in the country, that the Central Council of Jews in Germany is now an established and important partner of international Jewish organizations as well as the state of Israel, and that—most pertinent to this dissertation—there are several Jewish writers who not only write in German, but who count among the best-selling contemporary German-language authors.19 Indeed, just a few years after Reich-Ranicki predicted the end of German Jewish literature, author Maxim Biller, who was born in 1960 to Russian Jewish parents and immigrated to Germany as a

child, declared that there is only one country outside of Israel “in dem noch eine ganze Weile eine originäre, selbstbestimmte jüdische Literatur entstehen wird” and that is Germany. In Biller’s argument, the physical proximity to the perpetrators of the Holocaust and their descendants would render it impossible for Jews living in Germany to forget about this traumatic past as well as to assimilate into mainstream, non-Jewish German culture. Because they are in such a unique cultural position, German Jews do not have the luxury of constructing a simple or straightforward identity, either as Germans or as Jews, and are instead obligated to reflect deeply about their sense of self and to articulate it clearly. According to Biller, this obligation extends to German Jewish writing as well: “Daß man als Jude in Deutschland nicht leben und schreiben sollte, ist logischerweise der erste und triftigste Grund dafür, warum man ausgerechnet als Jude in Deutschland besonders bewußt jüdisch lebt und schreibt.”

This literature of the new German Jewry is in many ways distinct from that of the generations before the war. The possibility of harmonious assimilation that marked pre-Holocaust German Jewish society is now shattered and the cultural continuity that German Jews had painstakingly cultivated from the Enlightenment through the Weimar Republic has been replaced by themes rooted in persecution, exile, and genocide—themes of trauma, rupture, and loss. And yet, while contemporary Jewish literature written in German rests on the other side of the Holocaust caesura, at least one continuity persists: as evidenced by Biller’s seemingly instinctive coupling of leben and schreiben in his description of German Jewish life, the primacy of reading, writing, and storytelling in the Jewish culture of Germany remains as present as ever, and its symbolic inflection has evolved in keeping with the needs of today’s German Jews. Woven into

---

21 Ibid., 90.
novels alongside accounts of traumatic twentieth-century historical events and difficult twenty-first-century societal integration, the theme of the textual or of narrative is often used in recent German Jewish writing to negotiate, to bridge, even to challenge, the ruptures, silences, and gaps that mark so much of postwar German Jewish literature. The tripartite function of *haggadah*—expanding, binding, and flowing—that originally applied to the role of narrative in the Torah and Talmud can be seen in the literature of contemporary German Jews as well, as the theme of narrative and storytelling is used to expand understanding of the past and present, to forge connections between generations and disparate cultural groups, and to transmit cultural memory and knowledge across time and space.

This dissertation explores the autofictional works of three contemporary Jewish authors writing in German in which reading, writing, and storytelling are directly thematized in order to examine how this long-standing theme in Jewish culture is used by modern German Jewish writers to construct their conceptions of identity and belonging, both to German and Jewish cultures as well as to groups outside of and beyond their bounds. At stake are questions such as: how do these texts use narrative to both engage and disengage from German and Jewish cultures? How do they navigate identities and localities that extend beyond these two cultures, due both to the international nature of Jewish history and to an increasingly connected Europe and a globalized world? How do these texts narrativize familial and cultural memory of the Holocaust—the most formative experience and dominant trauma of their parents and grandparents—when the silences, gaps, and ruptures caused by it impede communication between generations? In what way do various narratological elements contribute to the construction of a(n) (in)coherent sense of identity and belonging? How are the acts of writing, reading, and storytelling portrayed at the diegetic level and what relationship do these themes bear to the meta-level construction of the text? The three
authors whose works are addressed in the following chapters—Barbara Honigmann, Gila Lustiger, and Katja Petrowskaja—all use narrative innovatively and deliberately in their autofictional explorations of memory and constructions of identity, rendering the answers to these many questions intricate and nuanced. In some instances, narrative serves to connect Jewishness to Germanness and in other instances, it works to firmly separate the two. Where one writer relies on narrative, literature, and text to weave herself into the fabric of an integrated European culture, another uses them to critique and distance herself from it. Recounting the stories from their lives and those of their relatives, Honigmann, Lustiger, and Petrowskaja reimagine the past in order to lament their family’s traumas, to acknowledge and accept the postmemorial effects they have caused, and to construct a vibrant transnational, intercultural, and multilingual present.

i. German Jewish Culture and Literature After 1945

Despite the World Jewish Congress’s professed determination in 1948 that Jews should and would never again settle in the land of the Nazi perpetrators, small Jewish communities began to develop in both German states in the years immediately following the war. In the German Democratic Republic, East Berlin housed the state’s only Jewish community of significant size. Numbering around 3,000 in the immediate postwar years, the Jewish community of the GDR would dwindle to a mere 350 by 1989 due to a steady stream of immigration either to the FRG or abroad.22 Across the partition in the Federal Republic, however, the 15,000 or so German Jews who had survived the war in Germany or returned from exile were joined by a similar number of Eastern European

---

displaced persons who chose to remain in the FRG.23 While the German Jews tended to coalesce in Düsseldorf, Frankfurt am Main, and West Berlin, those of Eastern European heritage settled largely in Munich.24 Tellingly, the leading figures of the Jewish community rejected the designation *deutsche Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens* which had been the preferred terminology before 1933, and instead dubbed their organization the *Zentralrat der Juden in Deutschland*.25 Not only did this appellative shift indicate the non-German, Eastern European heritage of a significant number of Jews now living in Germany, it also signaled a break with the previous generations of German Jews who had understood themselves as assimilated and accepted German citizens.

Jewish life in the first few decades after the war existed in almost total isolation from German society. The *Zentralrat der Juden in Deutschland* operated largely behind the scenes and had little to no dealings with the public. Synagogues were established in apartment courtyards or in hastily built, Spartan structures, and religious life was similarly limited, with fewer than a dozen rabbis often serving the needs of upwards of eighty Jewish communities.26 While both German and Eastern European Jews had decided to stay in Germany for any number of reasons, the general sense was one of impermanence and precarity. Most Jews understood their postwar life in Germany to be a temporary circumstance. They were, as a common saying went, sitting “auf

---

gepackten Koffern.”

German-speaking Jews wrote and achieved a modicum of literary acclaim during this time, but both the number of authors and their range of subjects was rather narrow. In the West, writers such as Paul Celan, Nelly Sachs, and Wolfgang Hildesheimer reflected on the question raised by Adorno as to whether literature after Auschwitz was appropriate or even possible. Written by those who had experienced the persecution and destruction of the Holocaust firsthand, the vast majority of literature published in the FRG by Jewish writers of this generation was “composed of autobiographical accounts of the Holocaust or of life in exile.”

By the mid-1980s, however, Jewish life in Germany began to emerge from the shadows. Whereas the previous three decades saw a “retreat into private life,” as Michael Brenner terms it, three controversies in the year 1985 drew vocal, public criticism from the Zentralrat, as well as from Jewish writers, journalists, and other cultural figures. The visit of US President Reagan and German Chancellor Kohl to the military cemetery in Bitburg where members of the Waffen-SS were buried, the premiere of Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s supposedly anti-Semitic play Der Müll, die Stadt und der Tod, and the Historikerstreit were all met with outspoken protest and open resistance. In addition to this main orthodoxy, other voices began to develop as the Jewish

---

31 Remmler, 796.
communities grew and diversified. In the wake of the 1982 Lebanon War, groups of younger, liberal Jews became openly critical of Israeli politics, standing in opposition to the Jewish establishment, whose party line-support for Israel was absolute. A Jewish public sphere started to form, marked by the founding of the journal Babylon: Beiträge zur jüdischen Gegenwart, which began circulation in 1986.

That same year saw the publication of Barbara Honigmann’s debut Roman von einem Kinde, the book referenced at the outset of this introduction and one of the three literary works that Hartmut Steinecke argues inaugurated a “neue Phase der jüdischen Literatur,” which continued to grow and flourish over the next few years, especially after unification: “Seit Beginn der neunziger Jahre—und damit etwa zugleich mit der politischen Wende—nahm die Zahl der Autoren und Werke rasch zu.” During this new phase of Jewish literature, a generation of German-speaking authors who self-identified as Jewish in their writing, in interviews, and in other public forums, arrived on the literary scene. In addition to Honigmann, this new generation included such writers as Katja Behrens, Maxim Biller, Esther Dischereit, Rafael Seligmann, Ruth Beckermann, Doron Rabinovici, Robert Schindel, Robert Menasse, and Chaim Noll, among others. It was at this point that “contemporary Jewish writers living in Germany began to write about their lives in present-day Germany,” as Remmler notes. And while the events of the Second World War and the Holocaust feature significantly in the works of these writers, at issue in their literary contributions

35 Remmler, 798.
is less the chronicling of these early- and mid-twentieth century traumas and more an exploration of the effect they have had and continue to have on contemporary Jewish and non-Jewish German society—what Dan Diner termed the negative symbiosis in the first issue of Babylon. Borrowing Arendt’s notion of German-Jewish symbiosis, Diner’s negative symbiosis describes the complex dynamic between Jews and non-Jewish Germans that is rooted in a shared genocidal history: “Seit Auschwitz—welch traurige List—kann tatsächlich von einer ‘deutsch-jüdische Symbiose’ gesprochen werden—freilich einer negative: für beide, für Deutsche wie für Juden, ist das Ergebnis der Massenvernichtung zum Ausgangspunkt ihres Selbstverständnisses geworden; eine Art gegensätzlicher Gemeinsamkeit—ob sie es wollen oder nicht.”³⁶ As Stuart Taberner explains, the essays and fiction of many of these second generation writers feature German Jewish protagonists who “experience profound irritation with the anxiously unrelenting official discourse of reconciliation combined with irrepressible feelings of alienation, marginalization, and even exclusion.”³⁷

A further shift in Germany’s Jewish culture and literature occurred in the first twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. While the number of Jews living in the GDR had decreased to only 350, the Jewish population of the Federal Republic had held steady around 30,000. In the early 1990s, however, this number increased as much as eightfold. With the collapse of the Iron Curtain, Jews from the former Soviet Union were now free to emigrate abroad. Most of them went to Israel and others to the United States, but between 1990 and 2010 more than 200,000 people with Jewish heritage or a Jewish spouse chose to relocate to Germany with the explicit aim of

³⁷ Stuart Taberner, German Literature of the 1990s and Beyond: Normalization and the Berlin Republic (Rochester: Boydell and Brewer, 2005), 178.
These so-called Kontingentflüchtlinge came primarily from Russia, Ukraine, and the Baltic states and their numbers were so overwhelming that 85% of Jews in Germany can now trace their origins to the former Soviet Union. Though the vast majority of these émigrés are secular, they self-identify as Jews and indeed had to in order to be granted refugee status in Germany. For the existing German Jewish community, the question of the Jewishness of these former residents of the Soviet Union was seen as problematic, as they were for the most part identifiably Jewish in neither halachic nor cultural terms.

Due to these differences from the previously existing Jewish community and the resultant conflicts, this new presence of large Eastern European populations has substantially altered and diversified the sense of identity and belonging among Jews living in Germany, as well as their relationship to cultural and collective memory. So different is the degree of religious observance and the sense of cultural and ethnic belonging that Thomas Nolden asserts that contemporary Jewish culture in Germany exists “zum größtem Teil außerhalb des institutionellen Rahmens des

40 These Soviet Jewish émigrés were referred to as Kontingentflüchtlinge because their entry into Germany occurred in legal accordance with the 1980 Act Concerning Measures for Refugees Accepted as Part of Humanitarian Campaigns, commonly referred to as the Refugees Quota Law. Originally passed as a humanitarian gesture in response to the plight of refugees from Indochina, it was agreed in January 1991 that this law could be applied to immigrants from the former Soviet Union. The title “quota refugees” was intended to simplify bureaucratic processes and avoid public debate, but Russian Jews immigrating to Germany did not have to abide by customary international norms regarding asylum seekers, such as relinquishing papers and receiving a refugee identity card in accordance with the Geneva Convention. Instead, Russian Jews were simply given German travel documents, an approach taken to prevent the diplomatic tensions that could arise by implying that post-Soviet states were persecuting their Jewish populations. See: Yfaat Weiss and Lena Gorelik, “The Russian-Jewish Immigration,” in A History of Jews in Germany Since 1945, ed. Michael Brenner, trans. Kenneth Kronenberg (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), 389-394.
Kultusgemeinden.” And while many of the Kontingentflüchtlinge were affected either directly or indirectly by the Nazi genocide, the memory of Stalinist terror, the anti-Semitic campaigns of the Communist regimes, and the interethnic conflicts that arose following the collapse of those regimes is often a more immediate and present reference point in their cultural memory and concomitant construction of identity. Many of the writers who have emerged from this group—such as Wladimir Kaminer, Lena Gorelik, Olga Grjasnowa, Alina Bronsky, and Katja Petrowskaja—explore these intersections of identity and memory in their works. Whereas Dan Diner’s negative symbiosis dominated and continues to dominate the work of many non-Soviet Jews writing in German, the literature produced by these new authors complicates its binary framework. Absent the shared history Diner’s negative symbiosis relies on, the relationship between Germans and formerly Soviet Jews is more complex and less oppositional, reflecting the myriad ways émigrés and younger generations fashion their ethnic, national, cultural, and religious identity.

**ii. German Jews and Generational Divides**

In addition to this division between Jews of German origin and those of Soviet origin, a distinction between generations is also often drawn by scholars when discussing contemporary Jewish writing in German. Those who had “personally experienced exile, internment, and/or loss of relatives in the camps” are typically categorized as writers of the first generation. Those born after 1945 fall into either the second or third generation, with both the definition and significance of this distinction varying by scholar. Stephan Braese provides a straightforward, if overly narrow,
delineation when he states that members of the second generation are “Jews born sometime between 1945 and the beginning of the 1950s who lack any personal recollection of the war years.” Meanwhile, Garloff and Mueller present us with a more nebulous definition, arguing that the second generation is best defined by those who had first “confronted the long silence surrounding the Holocaust, especially in perpetrator countries.” Perhaps the simplest and most common definition, however, is the one employed by Erin McGlothlin, who writes that texts that fall under the rubric of second-generation writing “are either written by the children of Holocaust perpetrators or survivors, or […] are written from the perspective of these children.” The demarcation of the third generation, by contrast, is generally more easily agreed upon, being “the grandchildren of those who survived the Holocaust.”

While a consideration of the differences between the second and third generations of authors is worthwhile and will likely become even more pronounced in time, drawing clear-cut distinctions between generations is not a main concern of this dissertation. Indeed, Braese explicitly warns that “overstating the differences between the second and third generations should be avoided if a clearer understanding of the starting position of Jewish German authors writing in Germany is to be attained.” Hannes Stein reinforces this warning when he asserts that the cultural events he sees as having most emphatically influenced contemporary Jewish writers—the “three shocks” of the Bitburg and Fassbinder controversies in 1985 and the Gulf War in 1991—did not

43 Braese, 25.
44 Garloff and Mueller, 7.
46 Garloff and Mueller, 2.
47 Braese, 26.
affect authors of the second and third generations in substantially different ways. Moreover, it is often difficult to distinguish whether authors should be grouped as second or third generation when both their parents and grandparents are Holocaust survivors, as is the case with herein-discussed authors Gila Lustiger and Katja Petrowskaja. In some cases, scholars assign writers to whichever generation is more expedient for their project, as when Markus Neuschäfer consistently designates Lustiger’s narrator a member of third generation—he uses the term “Enkelfigur”—despite the fact that it is her father’s experiences in the camps and death marches that comprise the emotional and narrative crux of the novel.

Far more important than an overly sharp distinction between the second and third generations is the difference between writers of the first generation and those that succeed them. With the emergence of German Jewish writers who had not personally experienced the Holocaust, the construction of a “Nach-Shoah-Identität,” as Micha Brumlik terms it, was first possible. While this identity was marked in large part by a new emphasis on contemporary German Jewish life, remembrance of the Holocaust remained a central theme as well. But whereas first generation literature was written from the perspective of witnesses and survivors, portrayal of the Holocaust and its aftermath in the writing of subsequent generations focuses instead on the inherited effects of this trauma as well as the continued impact it has on relations between Jews and non-Jewish Germans. As Hansen and Geyer put it, portrayals of the Holocaust in literature have “shifted from being an issue of motivation (the willingness to remember) to an issue of representation (how to

---

48 Hannes Stein, “Schm’a Jisruel, kalt is ma in die Fiß,” in Deutsche Nachkriegsliteratur und der Holocaust, ed. Stephan Braese et al. (Frankfurt/M.: Campus, 1998), 404.
That the vantage point of second- and third-generation German Jewish writing is the present, despite its near constant thematization of the past, is captured in the term *concentric writing*, coined by Thomas Nolden. Though the events of the Holocaust have a strong significance for the lives of these writers, Nolden explains, “[d]ie nachgeborenen Generationen können sich diesem zentralen Ereignis in der Geschichte des modernen Judentums nur durch eine Bewegung nähern,” and in most cases, “gelangt diese Annäherung nicht.”

This idea of a simultaneous absence and presence of Holocaust memory in the lives on second- and third-generation authors is echoed by literary critic Geoffrey Hartman, who states that while “the eyewitness generation expressed a return of memory despite trauma,” members of subsequent generations express “the trauma of memory turning in the void,” making them “all the more sensitive, therefore, to whatever tries to fill the gap.” In her book on contemporary Holocaust literature, McGlothlin takes a similar tack, arguing that “one of the most prominent aspects of these texts […] is the distinct sense of being marked by an unlived narrative, of carrying the trace of the Holocaust past within the present.” Her analysis then goes on to examine this complex intersection in semiotic terms: “The signifier remains, but it is unable to locate its referent, resulting in a truncated relationship between experience and effect.” Whatever methodological approach is taken, however, most scholars of contemporary German Jewish literature acknowledge the continued impact of the Holocaust and other, often related traumatic twentieth-century events.

---

52 Nolden, 10.
54 McGlothlin, 8.
55 Ibid., 10.
historical events on the work of contemporary German Jewish writers. Explicitly connecting the two post-Holocaust generations, Braese writes that “[i]n their critical and literary undertakings the second and third generations engaged a common ‘object’ by focusing on the generation of those who had personally experienced persecution and destruction.”

Because of this focus on the experiences of those who survived or perished in the Holocaust, a large number of the works produced by second- and third-generation German Jewish writers are autobiographical family novels that narrate events from the lives of at least two generations. While such novels appeared in the late 1980s and early 1990s, “jüdische Memorienliteratur,” as Thomas Kraft calls it, had coalesced into a genre of its own by the late 1990s. Since then, multigenerational autobiographical works—whether marketed as memoir or fiction—have become “the most prominent genre in contemporary Jewish writing in Europe.” In many ways, this is part of a wider trend within German literature in general. Towards the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first, German-language literature written by both Jews and non-Jews experienced what Monika Reidel identifies as a “Renaissance des Familienromans.” As the term renaissance indicates, this recent trend in German writing can be viewed as a latent continuation of the prominence of Generationenromane of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, represented most notably by Thomas Mann’s Buddenbrooks. But as more than one literary scholar points out, the recent family novels subvert the genealogical and

---

56 Braese, 26.
chronological structure of older works like Mann’s, and instead reconstruct family histories retrospectively, usually from the perspective of the youngest adult generation.  

For the contemporary authors writing these works, this narrative positioning allows them to highlight and thematize intergenerational memory transmission, creating opportunities for “meta-fictional reflections on memory and the writing of history.”  

As the history of twentieth-century Europe bears many discontinuities, family stories told from the vantage point of the present allow writers to engage with the ruptures, silences, and gaps that often mark the family lives of their narrators.

Thomas Nolden, however, distinguishes between the impetus behind the family stories of non-Jewish Germans and those of their Jewish counterparts. He identifies the autobiographical focus on the family that appears in the works of so many non-Jewish German writers as “eines der bestimmenden Merkmale der deutschen Literatur seit dem Neuen Subjektivismus,” but locates the motivations of Jewish authors in larger issues of belonging, cultural continuity, and identity construction:


Nolden, 32.
Indeed, it is precisely this transformation of the past into Geschichten rather than into Geschichte that this dissertation is concerned with. By transposing familial memory into narrative, these German Jewish writers are able to stage interactions, conversations, and exchanges between generations of Jews that, due to the Holocaust and other historical traumas, could not take place in reality. Additionally, as Jewish writing in German is aimed at a primarily non-Jewish readership, these autobiographical family novels become a space in which Jewish authors can negotiate and articulate their sense of identity in contemporary German culture and in which non-Jewish readers can gain insight into Jewish life and the relationship between Jews and non-Jews both past and present.

iii. Theories of Memory and Transmission

The exploration of the simultaneous absence and presence of the past that marks so much of contemporary German Jewish literature places issues of memory and its transmission at the forefront of related scholarly inquiry. Over the past several decades, various theoretical frames of reference have been devised and proposed by a number of memory scholars. One of the most relevant for this project is Marianne Hirsch’s concept of postmemory, originally coined to describe the children of Holocaust survivors, whose connection to their parents’ past was so intimate that it was experienced by them as a form of memory itself.63 Because second- and third-generation authors by definition did not experience the events of the Holocaust or the Second World War firsthand, their knowledge of these events and their ancestors’ involvements is necessarily either communicated to them by older generations or cobbled together through research. Written at a

time in which the number of remaining survivors is rapidly declining and the Holocaust is receding ever further into the past, the concept of postmemory is increasingly useful with regard to recent German Jewish writing. Rather than concerning itself with accuracy and historical truth, postmemorial writing employs narrative to acknowledge and explore the traumatic silences and suppressed questions that commonly characterize communication within German Jewish families. As Eigler explains, these postmemorial narratives “are less concerned with the historical facts and events themselves than with the subsequent processes of remembering and forgetting, and of preserving and transforming aspects of the past.”

This transformation occurs largely due to the mediated nature of postmemory. As the memories transmitted from one generation to another are often fragmentary and muddled, postmemory is mediated “not by recall,” but by the “imaginative investment, projection, and creation” that is used to fill the gaps.

Whereas Hirsch’s concept of postmemory was devised in large part to address these gaps, silences, and uncertainties in intergenerational memory, the mnemonic model formulated by Jan and Aleida Assmann relies more heavily on a certain degree of cultural continuity. Drawing heavily on the notion of social or collective memory devised by French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs in the 1920s, the Assmann model distinguishes between cultural memory and communicative memory. Cultural memory encompasses the methods through which a nation or society remembers, commemorates, and conceives of the past. More removed from the individual and more mired in state and political power than communicative memory, cultural memory “transcends eras and is supported by normative texts”; it consists predominantly of institutions such as archives, libraries, and museums as well as rituals such as commemorative events and

---

65 Hirsch, 5.
holidays.\textsuperscript{66} By contrast, communicative memory denotes the function of memory within close-knit social groups (usually families), is “informal,” and “aris[es] from everyday interaction” of up to three generations.\textsuperscript{67} As opposed to the hierarchical and institutionalized nature of cultural memory, communicative memory involves “no specialists, no experts,” and depends largely on organically occurring oral discourse as well as private genres of written discourse, such as diaries and letters.\textsuperscript{68} The works of recent German Jewish authors typically engage with both of these kinds of memory, expressing various degrees of contentment or annoyance with the cultural memory discourse of the German state or the European Union while navigating the choppy waters of their own family’s communicative memory.

Both Hirsch’s postmemory and the Assmanns’ early formulations of cultural and communicative memory describe the vertical transmission of memory within one (variously sized) social group throughout time. But given the hybrid identity that is intrinsic to German Jews, the diversification in notions of ethnic and cultural belonging wrought by the influx of Jewish émigrés from the former Soviet Union, and the increasingly interconnectedness of both Europe and the world as a whole, any thorough conception of the functions of memory must also include frameworks that address the horizontal relationship between different memory groups. One such framework is Michael Rothberg’s concept of \textit{multidirectional memory}, which describes how memory of the Holocaust can help the “articulations of other histories,” such as decolonization and American slavery.\textsuperscript{69} Rothberg opposes what he calls \textit{competitive memory}, that is, the zero-

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., 38.
sum conception of memory in which any particular event can only be remembered at the expense of others, and instead suggests that we consider memory as “multidirectional,” or “as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative.”\textsuperscript{70} For many of the Jewish authors who immigrated to Germany from former Soviet states, this concept is particularly relevant. While they now abide in a country whose memory sphere is dominated by the “Never Again” discourse of the \textit{Vergangenheitsbewältigung}, their own familial histories are often more shaped by historical events and traumas perpetrated by the Soviet and other Communist regimes. The distinct but related concept of \textit{cosmopolitan memory} is introduced in the work of Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, who examine the globalized form of memory surrounding the Holocaust that developed in the 1990s. Due to the “abstract nature of ‘good and evil’ that symbolizes the Holocaust,” Levy and Sznaider argue that “memories of the Holocaust facilitate the formation of transnational memory cultures, and in turn have the potential to become the cultural foundation for global human-rights politics.”\textsuperscript{71} Both the transnational nature and the mnemonic focus of contemporary German Jewish literature—indeed, of all the literature discussed in this dissertation—result in interesting implications for Levy and Sznaider’s work.

While most of these frameworks were not originally devised with their relationship to literature in mind, literary texts offer unique possibilities for examining and representing the complex and nuanced processes involved in memory, as Nolden, Eigler, Aleida Assmann, and Eva Lezzi all indicate.\textsuperscript{72} As narratives surrounding memory in the public sphere are often driven by

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 3.
political interests, they necessarily exclude forms of memory that do not conform with the “programmatische Äußerungen” and “diskursive Bestimmungen” endorsed by the state or other institutions of power.\textsuperscript{73} This means that coherent, linear, and palatable memory narratives dominate the public sphere, excluding or obscuring mnemonic processes that are intricate or fragmented or that challenge the status quo. In contrast to exclusionary, politically-driven memory narratives, Eigler argues that “literary texts are in a unique position to capture the complex and nonlinear processes of remembering” and that family narratives in particular lend themselves “to an exploration of the intersections between individual and collective memories of 20\textsuperscript{th} century German and European history.”\textsuperscript{74} The gaps, silences, and repressed aspects that mark much of contemporary German Jewish individual and communicative memory, but that are ignored in mainstream memory discourses, can by acknowledged, explored, and negotiated in literature through a variety of means. Diegetic conversation or plot points that revolve around such ruptures constitute the most conventional method for addressing these aspects, but literary texts—especially those told from the vantage point of the present—also allow for meta-level reflections on “the very process of remembering and the constructedness of the past.”\textsuperscript{75} Lastly, the variety of narrative structures employed by contemporary authors in autobiographical family novels serve to construe the reality and to probe the impact of these nonlinear, fragmented, or unutterable forms of memory. Many of the texts produced by these authors blur boundaries, suspend temporality, and otherwise transgress or radically reshape the generic conventions of traditional autobiographical texts.

\textsuperscript{73} Nolden, 12.
\textsuperscript{74} Eigler, “Writing in the New Germany,” 17.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 26.
Theoretical positions on the generic conventions of autobiography have tended to coincide with, as Michael Sheringham puts it, “prevailing views of narrative”: “Any moves towards a rehabilitation of narrative’s mimetic, heuristic or pragmatic functions are likely to support comparable shifts in the way autobiography is regarded.”\(^7^6\) Indeed, much like the underpinnings of realist literature, the primary understanding of autobiography for most of its history has been that of mimesis: the “truthful” representation of an autonomous and homogeneous self. While strict, unerring factuality has never been an expectation—as Goethe’s title *Dichtung und Wahrheit* suggests—readers nonetheless presumed that autobiographers would provide “truthful” accounts of their lives, free from intentional distortion and extravagant self-fashioning. Autobiographers such as Rousseau went as far as to assert the “honesty” of their writings, ensuring that they had not deliberately omitted nor added anything of importance.\(^7^7\) This hermeneutic paradigm that emphasized the authenticity of the life and the authority of the autobiographer continued to dominate well into the mid-twentieth century. In 1956, Georges Gusdorf defined autobiography as “eine Art Apologie oder Theodizee des persönlichen Wesens,” though he also shifted the epistemological emphasis somewhat in his prioritizing of the genre’s literary rather than historic function.\(^7^8\) With the rise of deconstructionism in the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, the pendulum swung away from the pole of authenticity and toward the deconstructionist view that no

---


representation of self is possible in language, only an illusion of “self” produced by a purely textual subject. The classic tenets of coherence, circular closure, interiority, et cetera, that were previously seen as defining features of the autobiographical genre were now understood to be historically limited and effectually infeasible, with theorists like Michael Sprinker and Almut Finck even proclaiming the “end of autobiography.”

Since the late 1980s, the pendulum appears to have come to a standstill between these two extremes of fact and fiction. Serge Doubrovsky’s concept of *autofiction* captures this middle ground well. Coined originally in 1977, the term *autofiction* appears first on the back-cover blurb of Doubrovsky’s novel *Fils*, which reads: “Fiction, of facts and events strictly real, if you prefer, autofiction, where the language of adventure has been entrusted to the adventure of language in its total freedom.” In this description, autofiction denotes a factual autobiographical narrative that reports real events involving actually existent people, but its textual construal is inescapably determined by the limits and laxities of language. While this may seem to simply be a reiteration of the deconstructionist notion of the constitutive power of language in which autobiography can only ever convey the mere illusion of self, Doubrovsky clarifies his term further in a 1997 interview. In this expanded definition, Doubrovsky states that autofiction implies a narrative that


80 Doubrovsky developed his idea of autofiction more or less in direct response to Philippe Lejeune’s definition of autobiography, published in his seminal essay, “The Autobiographical Pact” (1973). It rethinks autobiography as an institutionalized communicative act in which author and reader enter into a particular ‘pact’ sealed by the triple reference of the same proper name: “Autobiography (narrative recounting the life of the author) supposes there is identity of name between the author (such as s/he figures, by name, on the cover), the narrator of the story and the character who is being talked about.”; Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 12.

is largely factual, but is written and read with an understanding that events and facts can be rearranged or altered in the service of portraying more completely the identity of the protagonist-cum-author:

The meaning of one’s life in certain ways escapes us, so we have to reinvent it in our writing, and that is what I personally call **autofiction** […] *Fils* is an attempt to write, not an account of, but an experience of analysis within one day of the narrator’s life. It is obviously fictitious, because it is a forced totalization, it is totalized only by the text, it is not recapturing of my whole life in one day. So the essence of the book is already fictitious although all the details in it are strictly correct and referential as we would say.  

Here, Doubrovsky articulates what has become an increasingly common conception when it comes to autobiographical writing: to narrativize is necessarily to fictionalize. Autofiction, therefore, does not fabricate events, but embraces the creative potential intrinsic in the act of writing. As such, autofiction as a genre is not mimetic, but poietic, in which the emerging portrait of the subject includes an element of the imaginary. The narrative act involved in autobiographical writing, then “acquires a vital role in the construction of a sense of identity,” as Martin Löschnigg puts it. In his narratologically grounded discussion of autobiographical discourse, Löschnigg defines the genre as “the textual manifestation of a continuous process of identity-construction […] rather than re-construction” and stipulates that such identity-construction “is decisively shaped by present

---


83 In a 1988 essay, Doubrovsky asserts again the narrative referentiality of his work, referring specifically to *Fils*: “I wrote ‘novel’ on the cover simply because I felt obliged to, thus instituting a novelistic pact by asserting fictitiousness, in spite of the tireless insistence of historical and personal reference…As in a good and scrupulous autobiography, everything that is said and done in the narrative is drawn literally from my own life. Places and dates have been verified with maniacal insistence.” See: Serge Doubrovsky, “Autobiography/Truth/Psychoanalysis,” trans. Logan Whalen and John Ireland, *Genre* 26, no. 1 (1993): 33.

motivations, desires and anxieties.”

When it comes to autobiographical family novels in particular, the overlap between text and identity construction may be even greater. Reidel argues that in such works “die Arbeit an der Vergangenheit” is in reality “Arbeit an einer Identität,” which is to say that (re)constructing one’s familial past is done largely in service of construction an identity and sense of self in the present.

v. At the Intersection of Narrative and Identity

The view that narrative rendering of lived experience engenders a sense of identity appears in the work of many literary scholars writing on autobiography. Anglicist Paul John Eakin, for instance, argues that “narrative plays a central, structuring role in the formation and maintenance of our sense of identity.”

Germanists and Medienwissenschaftler Peter Braun and Bernd Stiegler, meanwhile, promote life narrative to “einem allgemeinen kulturellen Wissensmuster.” Such claims do not exist only in the unscientific field of literary studies; psychologists, too, have long theorized and conducted studies regarding the relationship between narrative and identity. Around the same time Doubrovsky was introducing and clarifying his concept of autofiction, the field of psychology was undergoing a similar shift, increasingly emphasizing narrativity as a crucial factor in the construction of identity. In a 1988 paper, psychologist Donald Polkinghorne argues that narrative works to structure contingent experience, enabling us to perceive identity as coherent:

“We achieve our personal identities and self-concept through the use of the narrative configuration,

85 Ibid., 269; 259.
86 Reidel, 154.
and make our existence into a whole by understanding it as an expression of a single unfolding
and developing story." More recent psychological studies seem to support this assertion, with
some even indicating that dysnarrativia, that is, the inability to construct or comprehend stories,
significantly impairs a sense of selfhood.

In the wake of what literary and cultural critic Martin Klepper calls “the twin crisis of
identity and narrative in the twentieth century,” the inevitability of narrative as constitutive of
identity has taken on new significance, with autobiographical narratives adapting to increasingly
multiplex identities and constructions of identity adapting to non-linear, gap-filled, or disjointed
narratives. The historical ruptures of the twentieth century—for this dissertation, the Holocaust,
the Second World War, and the creation and dissolution of the Soviet Union, in particular—leave
those contemporary authors seeking to write autobiographical family novels with little by way of
coherent or linear narrative. The implications of these traumatic events, the resultant familial and
cultural fractures, and the historical inconsistencies and unknowns for autobiographical narratives
and the identity construction they are inherently linked with lie at the heart of this project. In the
following chapters, I explore how the authors featured in this project use narrative to navigate
these traumatic family histories, to express their often uneasy cultural position as German Jews,
and to construct their complex identities. In so doing, I examine the role of narrative from two
different angles. As the authors included in this project negotiate these heavy subjects,
interweaving stories of their parents’ and grandparents’ pasts alongside tales from their own

89 Donald Polkinghorne, Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences (Albany: State University
90 See: Jerome Bruner, Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life (Cambridge, MA: Harvard
University Press, 2003), 86.
Claudia Holler and Martin Klepper (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2013), 2.
childhoods and contemporary lives, each of them also thematizes narrative itself, rendering reading, writing, and storytelling as significant to these works as the stories and anecdotes contained within them. But in addition to analyzing how the authors conceive of narratives and relate them to memory, identity, and belonging, I also look at the meta-level construction of their works, focusing in each chapter on a particularly salient narratological element from each of the authors’ writing. I then relate the thematization of narrative at the diegetic level to the narrative construction of each book, using narrative theory to explore the interrelation of content and form.92

While many of the narratological terms that appear in this dissertation hail from the work of classical narratologists of the mid-twentieth century, each chapter also employs more recent narrative theory, penned by what have become known as feminist narratologists. Classical narratologists such as Roland Barthes, Gérard Genette, Gerald Prince, and Seymour Chatman, viewed the field as a “science” of narrative. Drawing heavily on formalist and structuralist principles, they aimed to outline formal laws and typologies and to identify stylistic and structural elements that were understood to inhere in narrative itself, regardless of thematic content and cultural context. The canon of texts used to distill such narrative typologies, however, was largely male-authored and early formulations of narrative theory tended to generalize from a masculine point of view.93 This patriarchal narratological landscape was challenged, however, as political

---

92 For more expansive information on the history and present of feminist narratology, see: Robyn Warhol and Susan Lanser, Narrative Theory Unbound: Queer and Feminist Interventions (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2015); Vera Nünning and Ansgar Nünning, Erzählanalyse und Gender Studies (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2004).
movements that emerged in the 1960s were academically institutionalized in women’s studies, ethnic studies, and postcolonial studies, thus changing the field of literary scholarship and spurring new inquiries into narrative that acknowledge identity and the historical distributions of power that shape it. These inquiries questioned the abstraction of form from cultural contingencies and opened the intellectual field to a rethinking of classical narrative poetics and to new narratological contributions that considered narrative from previously overlooked perspectives. At the forefront of this reworking of narrative theory were feminists, with the insertion of gender into the scope of narratology by Susan Lanser and Robyn Warhol in 1986 constituting the first challenge to the premises of classical narratology from within the field. Over the course of the next four decades, the field that came to be known as feminist narratology explored the implications of sex, gender, and/or sexuality for the understanding of narrative, reexamining and expanding the range of elements that are seen to constitute narrative texts as well as investigating how different narratological concepts, categories, and methods advance or obscure the study of gender and its role in narrative.

By the turn of the new millennium, feminist approaches had, in the words of literary critic Brian Richardson, “utterly and fruitfully transformed narrative theory and analysis in many ways.” The move towards linking technique and context introduced by feminist narratologists had been taken up and advanced by scholars from a number of different fields and backgrounds, causing the once fairly unified science of narratology to ramify into number of narratologies, all

---


collected under the umbrella term “postclassical narratology” coined by David Herman.  
  
While some branches of postclassical narratology employ lenses borrowed from scientific or metaphysical fields such as cognitive science and Leibniz’s possible worlds theory, many of them approach narrative theory through identity. In addition to feminist scholars who focus on gender, narrative theorists with postcolonial, queer, and/or intersectional approaches have gained prominence in the last couple decades. Given that this dissertation explicitly aims to investigate the intersection of narrative and identity in contemporary German Jewish writing, this approach to narrative analysis that takes cultural identity into consideration is especially apt. While at times I use such narrative theory to explore issues of gender, more often it appears in conjunction with other aspects of the authors’ identities as Germans, Jews, expatriates, Soviet émigrés, et cetera. The central question of this dissertation is not that of early formulations of feminist narratology—“How does gender shape narrative?”—but rather that of more recent postclassical identity-oriented narratology—“How does narrative shape identities that involve a variety of intersecting factors, including gender?” In this understanding, gender and other aspects of identity are not, as Robyn Warhol puts it in a 1999 essay, “a predetermined condition for the production of texts,” but rather “a textual effect” that is produced, much like the self in Doubrovsky’s concept of autofiction, as it is construed in language.

---

vi. Dissertation Overview

In determining which authors to include in this dissertation, I limited my selection to those who write in German, self-identify as Jews, are members of the second or third generation, and whose works can be classified as autobiographical or autofictional family novels. This description fits a number of authors not included in this dissertation, such as Lena Gorelik, Olga Grjasnowa and Viola Roggenkamp, but two further factors beyond these demographic or generic concerns restricted my selection to the three authors discussed in this dissertation. The first is that the works of Barbara Honigmann, Gila Lustiger, and Katja Petrowskaja all narrate their familial pasts and their present experiences as German Jews from the position of their adult selves. This narratorial position affords their narrators a certain degree of insight, introspection, and retrospection that does not generally occur in similar measure among child or adolescent narrators. The last and most important factor, however, is the role that narrative plays in their works. The three authors whose works are explored in this dissertation all discuss narrative in some form at the level of plot, explicitly delving into its role in constructing their senses of self, notions of belonging, and overall identities. That the three authors included in this dissertation are all women in not a coincidence—while there are German Jewish men writing autobiographical family novels, the vast majority of those authoring such works are women—but neither is their gender the main focus of my analysis. As my central question concerns narrative, gender as a facet of identity appears only when it is related to reading, writing, or storytelling in some way by the authors, such as when Gila Lustiger repeatedly identifies oral storytelling as feminine and fact-based journalism

98 For works by these authors that fit into the above mentioned description, see: Lena Gorelik, *Hochzeit in Jerusalem* (Munich: Diana Verlag, 2008); Olga Grjasnowa, *Der Russe ist einer, der Birken liebt* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2012); Viola Roggenkamp, *Familienleben* (Frankfurt/M.: S. Fischer Verlag, 2005).
as masculine. In other instances, such as Katja Petrowskaja’s story collection, gender is not explicitly connected to her understanding of narrative and, as such, remains largely outside the frame of inquiry.

Although the three authors discussed in this dissertation share many similarities, including nationality, ethnoreligious heritage, language, gender, and genre, they represent in many ways a diverse group of authors, demonstrating the vicissitudes of Jewish identities in contemporary Germany. Their experiences as residents or citizens of a German state vary widely, with Honigmann growing up in the GDR, Lustiger the FRG, and Petrowskaja immigrating to Germany only after its reunification. While they all write in German, the lives of these authors are all transnational and multilingual. In fact, none of the three women reside in the country of their origin. Honigmann and Lustiger both currently live in France, the former in Strasbourg and the latter in Paris. Petrowskaja, meanwhile, was born and raised in then-Soviet Kyiv and lived in Moscow for a time before moving to Berlin with her German husband. Their relationship to Jewishness and the Holocaust diverges greatly as well. Of the three, Honigmann is the sole observant Jew; in fact, her move to Strasbourg was motivated largely by a desire to live in a traditional Jewish community. Though both her parents were forced into exile during the Holocaust, this defining aspect of twentieth-century European Jewish life is not the dominant component of Honigmann’s Jewish identity. Instead, religious observance and present-day community play a far greater role in her sense of Jewishness. In contrast, Lustiger is religiously secular, but bears a strong sense of Jewish identity, both due to her mother, through whom she inherited Israeli citizenship and the Hebrew language, and through her father, through whom she inherited her German citizenship and language abilities along with his trauma as a Holocaust survivor. Perhaps due to her father’s direct experience in concentration camps and death marches
and to her cultural/secular Jewish identity, the Holocaust represents a much larger aspect of Lustiger’s sense of Jewishness than it does for Honigmann. Lastly, Petrowskaja identifies as Jewish, but possesses a much stronger connection to Russian and Soviet culture. For her, Jewishness largely appears as a present absence—a heritage lost due as much to the Holocaust as to the anti-Semitic Soviet regime. In addition to the differing relationship these three authors bear to Germanness and Jewishness, the diversity of their writing demonstrates their heterogeneity. The choice of narrative perspective, textual structure, tone, and style vary greatly among their works and while they all diegetically incorporate narrative, the role played by reading, writing, and/or storytelling in each authors’ writing point to the array of possibilities for navigating familial memory and constructing identity.

The next chapter of this project, “We Belong at Our Writing Desks: Identity, Writing, and Plot in Barbara Honigmann’s Autofiction,” examines three of Honigmann’s autofictional works, spanning in publication from 1986 to 2005 and delves in particular into the complex nature of plot and narrativity in her writing. Here, I explore the tension that exists between narrative structures at the diegetic and meta-levels. While Honigmann’s works firmly resist traditional plot structures that build toward and culminate the in telos of self-discovery in her writing, she embraces and employs terminology in her narration that relates directly to conventional narrative paradigms. I then demonstrate how the use of these terms related to plot and text genre at the diegetic level serves to construct a complex sense of self that is mired in many conflicting identities, while at the same time remaining dynamic and subject to constant reinterpretation and renegotiation.

The third chapter, “The Chronicler of Our Family’s Emotions: Memory, Storytelling, and Metanarration in Gila Lustiger’s So sind wir,” analyzes the complex schema of intergenerational memory transmission that is developed in Lustiger’s 2005 novel. In the novel, the narrator relates
the various methods her family members employed to pass on stories from their lives and the lives of other relatives. These methods range from an obsession with factual history to lively oral storytelling to a near complete eschewal of memory altogether to that which can be recorded and captured in books. In this chapter, I explore how these methods of memory transmission are portrayed by Lustiger as engendering various degrees of cultural belonging as a Jew, a German, and a European. By examining Lustiger’s use of metanarration in the first half of the book, I argue that, though the narrator herself prizes books above all other forms of memory transmission, she herself employs metanarrative strategies similar to those she critiques in her mother and grandmother’s oral storytelling in order to align the reader with her own sense of cultural belonging.

The last chapter of this dissertation, “In the Cleft of Languages: Belonging, Reading, and Intertextuality in Katja Petrowskaja’s Veilleicht Esther,” looks at Petrowskaja’s 2015 story collection. Composed of 6 chapter divided into 68 subsections, Petrowskaja’s book narrates her attempts to piece together disparate moments of her family’s history. Having grown up in Soviet Kyiv and immigrated to Germany only as an adult, Petrowskaja’s narrator tells stories featuring the cultural ruptures caused by Nazi genocide as well as those by the Soviet regime, and her investigation into her family’s past takes her to archives, museums, and memorial sites in modern-day Russia, Ukraine, Poland, Germany, and Austria. These institutionalized memory spaces, however, are critiqued by the narrator throughout the story collection for their reinforcement of historical power disparities, their reliance on linear, stable, and simplistic understandings of history, and their division of people into tidy groups of belonging based on ethnicity, nationality, or a victim-oppressor paradigm. In lieu of such problematic memory spaces, the narrator embraces a notion of memory and identity that is based on interconnected and simultaneous nodes of
belonging, a phenomenon that is not only expounded on in Petrowskaja’s narration, but also reflected in her consistent use of intertextuality. In this chapter, I explore the many intertexts that appear throughout Petrowskaja’s work and argue that they construct an affiliative, multicultural, and multilingual web of belonging that corresponds with the narrator’s multiplex identity.

It is the aim of this dissertation to further the ongoing scholarly conversation on memory, identity, and belonging as well as to foreground the vital role narrative plays in their construction. In its conception of narrative as contingent on cultural context, rather than as proceeding from universal norms, this dissertation also works to contribute to intersectional postclassical narratological scholarship as well as to broaden our understanding of the role of narrative in German Jewish culture and in human life.
CHAPTER 2

We Belong at our Writing Desks:
Identity, Writing, and Plot in Barbara Honigmann’s Autofiction

In a 1986 review of author Barbara Honigmann’s debut prose work Roman von einem Kinde, Marcel Reich-Ranicki describes her style as exhibiting a “kaum zu überbietender Schlichtheit” and “eine Naivität der höheren Art.”¹ This conception of Honigmann’s writing as simplistic and naïve would surface in many ensuing discussions, both journalistic and scholarly, not only of Roman von einem Kinde, which was awarded the Aspekte-Literaturpreis and launched the author’s literary career, but also of her subsequent works. The exact phrase “kaum zu überbietender Schlichtheit” appears in Birgit Lermen’s 1992 speech at the ceremony awarding Honigmann the Stefan-Andres-Preis and again in her 1998 profile of the author.² Honigmann’s style is likewise identified as “schlicht” in Horst Hartmann’s review of Roman von einem Kinde and her second book, Eine Liebe aus nichts, is similarly praised by Esther Röhr for its “Schlichtheit” and by Uta-Marie Heim for “diese um sich selbst wissende Naivität.”³ Others assessed this perceived simplicity and lack of sophistication more negatively, such as Ursula Homann, who in her review of Roman criticizes “die allzu gewollt wirkende künstliche Naivität

Joachim Kaiser, meanwhile, faults *Eine Liebe* for “die ein wenig gekünstelte Schlichtheit,” and regards Honigmann’s style as both “manieriert simpel” and “kalkulierte Einfachheitspose.” In his backcover blurb of the edition of *Roman* released in 2001, Reinhard Baumgart marries these two interpretations of the much-observed Honigmannian “Schlichtheit”—the one viewing it as a charming, but organic textual effect, the other seeing it as a deliberate affectation—when he states: “Auf den ersten Blick mag die Prosa Barbara Honigmanns noch aussehen wie naive Malerei, kraftvoll, direkt, einfach. Doch bei näherem Zusehen wird man bald entdecken, daß hier jenes Einfache erarbeitet wurde, das nach Brecht so schwer zu machen ist. Diese Texte erreichen etwas oft Versuchtes, oft Gescheitertes: Sie lassen Alltagserfahrungen aufleuchten wie bedeutende epische Abenteuer.”

Baumgart’s assessment of Honigmann’s work is distinct from the other many reviews and articles that describe Honigmann’s style in similar terms in that he not only notes the simplicity of her works’ prose, but also draws a connection between their simplicity and their plots, comparing her stories of the everyday with epic adventure tales. At first glance, this may seem like an appropriate comparison. After all, if her writing is as simple and naïve as it is so commonly described, it would make sense that it would bear commonalities with that simplest and most naïve of genres: the epic adventure story. Yet, at the plot-level, Honigmann’s works share no traits with this genre. With few exceptions, Honigmann’s stories and novels boast no yearning, no conflicts, no adventures, either real or metaphorical. There are no heroes who set out from home only to return at the end, having changed and grown from their journeys. There are not even readily

---

identifiable beginnings, middles, and ends. Absent as it is those traditional hallmarks of plot—continuity and causality—Honigmann’s writing would seem to be the exact opposite of the epics to which Baumgart compares them. Her prose may be consistently simple and straightforward, but her plots are occasionally complex, often meandering, and always in defiance of narrative convention.

Despite this resistance to narrative norms when it comes to the meta-level composition of her works, however, at the level of content, Honigmann turns time and again to the theme of writing and narrative. Indeed, the titles of the three works at the center of this chapter foreground this theme above all else, with Roman von einem Kinde (1986) and Ein Kapitel aus meinem Leben (2004) plainly alluding to common narrative genres and structures, while Damals, dann und danach (1999) creates its title from three of the most common discourse markers of narrative temporality. Roman, Kapitel, and other narrative-related terms such as Erzählung, Legende, Epos, and Mythos appear frequently in the bodies of these works, more often than not as a means of framing autobiographical events, and many, even less ambiguous ruminations on the nature of narrative, literature, and writing can be found throughout the three. What, then, are we to make of this incongruity between Honigmann’s affinity for narrative forms at the diegetic level, yet near complete eschewal of them at the level of plot? This chapter explores this apparent contradiction, arguing that, like many writers, Honigmann uses writing and plot to construct self-knowledge and identity, but that she does so through unconventional means. Rather than employing a traditional plot structure, which builds towards and culminates in the telos of self-discovery, Honigmann plays with plot and text genres at the diegetic level to construct a sense of self that, while mired in many conflicting identities and notions of belonging, is never stable, but rather subject to constant interpretation and renegotiation.
Nearly every review of Honigmann’s works provides an overview of the author’s life: born in 1949 to Jewish parents who met while in exile in London during the Second World War, her father a German journalist, her mother an Austro-Hungarian socialite-turned-socialist who had once been married to the legendary double agent Kim Philby and had herself conducted espionage on behalf of the Soviet government. After spending her childhood and early adulthood in the GDR, Honigmann left for Strasbourg in 1984, where she has lived ever since, a few streets beyond the German border, with her husband and two sons in a traditional Jewish community. In addition to writing, Honigmann spends her days painting and studying Torah with an array of other Jewish women whose origins span across Europe and Northern Africa. This information is, of course, crucial to the discourse surrounding Honigmann’s writing, as so much of it is autobiographical in nature. Indeed, the three works focused on in this chapter all present various renderings of her biography and those of her parents. Some of these renderings approximate reality more closely than others: Damals, dann und danach and Ein Kapitel aus meinem Leben both arguably seal Lejeune’s autobiographical pact, while Roman von einem Kinde consists of six Erzählungen, which, along with the aforementioned Eine Liebe aus nichts are described by Guy Stern as “pastiche of fictionalized autobiography.” Yet despite this autobiographical thrust, relying on Honigmann’s works alone to piece together a linear account of her life—such as the ones that feature so prominently in the journalism discussing her—would be something like trying to solve

---


Honigmann’s writing structured by chronology; rather, a dissection of the anatomy of her works reveals a complex system of epistolary passages, diary excerpts, anecdotes, snippets of poetry, factual reportage, and interview quotes both lengthy and suspect, all held together not by the expected narrative ligaments of linearity and logic, but by mere narratorial reflection. Time frames are shuffled in and out of; fragments of history and memory are wedged together to form a jagged whole.

The earliest of her prose works, Roman von einem Kinde tells six separate stories that demonstrate varying degrees of fictionality. The title story, which is by far the longest of the six, takes the form of a letter addressed to “Josef,” whose role in the letter writer’s life is never made clear. He is possibly an old friend or lover, perhaps even the father of the narrator’s child, but his identity is seemingly unimportant to the content of the letter. Other small anecdotes and stray musings abound, but the text is dominated by two topics: the birth of the letter writer’s son and her attendance at a Passover Seder in East Berlin. Chronological recounts of the two events are found nowhere in the text. The guiding question of most narratives—“what happened?” —is, in regard to these themes, beside the point. They function instead as psychic lesions around which the narrator’s thoughts and feelings, desires and fears coagulate. This lack of plot is found in many of the collection’s other stories: an inverse of the title story, “Eine Postkarte für Herrn Altenkirch” tells of the narrator’s regret at never having corresponded with an old acquaintance, while “Bonsoir, Madame Benhamou” describes the narrator’s reflections about her relocation from Berlin to Strasbourg as she rides her bicycle to the house at which she will study Torah. “Doppeltes Grab” approaches a typical plot slightly more in its story of Gershom Scholem’s visit to the GDR and his time spent with the narrator, including a visit to the Scholem family graves. But, as Jutta
Gsoels-Lorensen observes, even this story is one step removed: “Honigmann’s first-person narrator, without retelling the story of the Scholem family members, tells us how the story is told.”

Honigmann may be telling a story here, but it is the story of a story, not the actual events themselves.

This lack of traditional plots, structures, and stories can be found again in Honimgann’s later work Damals, dann und danach. Just as slim as Roman, Damals contains nine different essays. While the specific topic of each varies, the overarching theme of the volume is the narrator’s Jewish identity, especially as it relates to her ancestors, her German identity, and her life in French exile. The essay genre certainly demands little by way of traditional plot structures, but one might expect such a constellation of themes in the work of a second generation Jewish writer to delve into the experiences of her parents, grandparents, and other relatives. Indeed, in her discussion of Damals, Petra S. Fiero identifies “[d]er Kern ihrer Essays” as “die mühsame Rekonstruktion des Lebens ihrer Vorfahren.” Yet Fiero’s assessment is not quite accurate, as there are in fact only two essays in this collection approximating such a reconstruction of the narrator’s ancestral past: “Der Untergang von Wien,” which tells, in Honigmann’s trademark fragmented and temporally muddled style, of the narrator’s mother, and “Von meinem Urgroßvater, meinem Großvater, meinem Vater und von mir,” in which Honigmann draws together themes of Germanness, Jewishness, and writing while, as the title suggests, orienting herself in her paternal lineage. Even in these essays, however, Honigmann does little by way of reconstructing the lives of these familial figures. Rather, she knits stray biographical details,

---


connected by neither chronology nor causality, producing in the end not the story of her mother, her father, her grandfather, or great-grandfather, but a reflection on their stories, much as Gsoels-Lorensen describes of her recount of Scholem’s visit in “Doppeltes Grab.”

The lack of plot and story in Damals is demonstrated further by the titles of two of the essays contained in the collection: “Selbstporträt als Jüdin” and “Selbstporträt als Mutter.” In both of these pieces, Honigmann offers a meditation on these two identity categories, i.e., Jew and mother. While these meditations are obviously rendered in the medium of writing and belong to the realm of literature, the titles liken the works to visual art, a comparison that evokes Lessing’s explication of the differences between these two very distinct media. In his Laokoön oder über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie, he states that “die Malerei zu ihren Nachahmungen ganz andere Mittel, oder Zeichen gebrauchet, als die Poesie; jene nämlich Figuren und Farben in dem Raume, diese aber artikulierte Töne in der Zeit.”\(^\text{11}\) Even if we regard Lessing’s distinction as overly simplistic, there is a ring of truth to it: painting allows a single moment of time to be fixed forever in one static form, whereas texts, due to their physical layout as a linear succession of words, necessarily unfold in seriation, implying the passage of time. In terms of literature, this seriation moves beyond mere words to the chronological sequencing of events that constitute stories. Here the passage of time is necessary for the change and development that creates plot. This titular equation of her essays with visual art, then, disavows interest in traditional conceptions of plot. The focus of these essays lies on capturing a specific identity as it exists within a specific moment; concepts like sequence, progress, and development are here extraneous.

\(^{11}\) G. E. Lessing, Laokoön oder über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1994), 114.
The last of Honigmann’s works focused on in this chapter, *Ein Kapitel aus meinem Leben*, purports to do what the essays in *Damals* did not: tell the story of Honigmann’s parents, specifically her mother, Litzy Kohlmann. The ostensible center of this novel is the chapter of Litzy’s life referred to in the title in which she was married to the high-profile spy Kim Philby. Indeed, the back cover of *Ein Kapitel* states: “‘Ein Kapitel aus meinem Leben’ nannte die Mutter ihre Ehe mit dem ‘Meisterspion’ Kim Philby. Die Tochter hat es aufgeschrieben. Nüchtern und poetisch zugleich erzählt Barbara Honigmann das unglaubliche Leben einer außergewöhnlichen Frau im Europa der Kriege und Diktaturen.”

Yet, in actuality, *Ein Kapitel* tells very little of Litzy’s marriage to Philby, or any of the other, equally as remarkable chapters of her life. Her brief imprisonment in interwar Vienna for communist activity, the year her third husband—Honigmann’s father—spent in a Canadian work camp during WWII, the time they both spent living in the house of Stefan Zweig: none of these incidents merit more than a paragraph or two in the book’s 142 pages. Even Honigmann’s retelling of her parents’ experience during the London Blitz, one of the more tension-filled events to appear in the book, limits its drama to a short list of details—“brennende Straßen, einstürzende Häuser, die Furchtlosigkeit und Diszipliniertheit, ja Heldenhaftigkeit der Londoner und das tapfere Königspaar”—before moving on to the real focal point: a new Proust translation.

For all the terms suggesting sensationalism and action contained in the back cover description—“Meisterspion,” “unglaubliche Leben,” “Kriege und Diktaturen”—the actual text of *Ein Kapitel* boasts neither sensationalism nor action. As it does not ever really tell the story of Litzy’s life or even just the chapter of it in which she was married to Kim Philby, *Ein Kapitel* lacks the plot promised on its back cover altogether.

---

Other scholars have noted this unconventional plot structure of *Ein Kapitel* as well. Fiero describes the complex narrative strategy present in the books as “Assoziationsprosa versetzt mit Reflektionen, Abschweifungen und Anekdoten, die aber streng durchkomponiert ist.”\(^{14}\) Lilla Balint reinforces this description when she comments that “[v]erschiedene Lagen der Erinnerung werden dicht aufeinander geschichtet […] Dazu trägt weiterhin bei, dass oftmals lange Zitate der Mutter der Ich-Erzählerin auf Gesagtes treffen, das im freien Diskurs erinnert wird.”\(^{15}\) Delving more deeply into the unorthodox plot, Balint states that while the narrative tension is kept “permanent aufrecht” throughout the book, relief from that tension in the form of revelation or disclosure is never offered: “Am Ende des Romans angekommen, hat man nicht nur deshalb das Gefühl, nichts Weltbewegendes über ‘das Kapitel’ erfahren zu haben, weil sich Litzy Honigmann mit faktischen Informationen sehr zurückgehalten hat; ihrer Geheimniskrämerei wird von der Ich-Erzählerin zudem auch immer wieder der Wind aus den Segeln genommen.”\(^{16}\)

Balint portrays the lack of narrative resolution as more than an involuntary reflection of the fragmentary nature of twentieth and twenty-first century German Jewish familial memory, however. For Balint, Honigmann’s unconventional plot structure is deliberate. Indeed, as the narrator of *Ein Kapitel* mentions multiple times, the details of Litzy Kohlmann’s life are readily available in a number of sources—news reports, nonfiction books, official documents, among others—and thus could have been relayed exhaustively and chronologically. The information exists; the narrator simply has no interest in it. This lack of a conventional plot is not due then to the many mnemonic gaps produced by historical trauma, but rather is a deliberate choice—a notion.

\(^{14}\) Fiero, 180.
\(^{16}\) Ibid., 39.
supported by the lack of traditional plot in works that fall more heavily on the fiction side of autofiction, such as “Roman von einem Kinde.”

**ii. Narrative Structure from Plot to Narrativity**

To state that Honigmann’s works present nontraditional plots, however, is to raise questions about “traditional” plots: what standard plot structures do we find in Western narratives? How has the notion of “plot” been traditionally conceived by narratologists and other literary theorists? What function does plot perform for narrative? Like so many narratological concepts, “plot” as a critical term can be traced back at least as far as Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Here Aristotle describes μῦθος (*mythos*), usually translated into English as “plot,” as the arrangement of events, and in his list of the features of tragedy, he allocates the most important role to plot.\(^\text{17}\) It is plot, Aristotle argues, that allows characters to develop through their actions, causes the emotional investment of readers or viewers through reversals and recognitions, and generally constitutes “the soul and (as it were) source of tragedy.”\(^\text{18}\) Though, as evidenced by this last quote, Aristotle’s conception of plot was originally devised with the limited purview of the Athenian tragedy, he would go on to extend his discussion of plot beyond this to narrative genres and his ideas would heavily influence the work of later scholars, who would develop Aristotle’s principles further and apply them to a myriad of genres, including epics, drama, and the novel.

Aristotle’s emphasis on reversals and recognitions and their role in the unraveling of a complex plot would become codified in Western narrative theory in the concept of the climax. Gustav Freytag’s pyramid of rising and falling dramatic action, for instance, which relied heavily


\(^{18}\) Ibid., 12.
on both Aristotle’s *Poetics* and Horace’s *Ars Poetica*, presents a basic structure of plot as it revolves around the narrative turning point on the climax, a model that prevails in much of Western narrative theory.\(^{19}\) The formalism and structuralism of the twentieth century saw efforts like Freytag’s to model a basic plot structure broadened and deepened, as narratologists worked to trace the fixed, global sequences of events that supposedly constituted plot. Vladimir Propp’s 1928 *Morphology of the Folktale*, which traces thirty-one narrative functions—story elements understood “as an act of character” and “defined from the point of view of significance for the course of action”—is often viewed as having inaugurated this structuralist plot examination.\(^{20}\) The years after its 1958 translation into the English saw a boom in plot models and theories, notably Todorov’s proposed plot scheme of equilibrium, disturbance, and reestablishing of equilibrium.\(^{21}\) Plot, in these structuralist conceptualizations, becomes a pattern which grants coherence to the narrative. Foregrounded in this understanding of plot are notions of continuity, linearity, and sequence. Here, the concatenated arrangement of story events from beginning to middle to end constitute plot.

Other narratological inquiries into the nature of plot have highlighted causality, rather than continuity. The most well-known of these is likely E. M. Forster’s 1927 distinction between story (“The king died, and then the queen died”) and plot (“The king died, and then the queen died of grief.”).\(^{22}\) In Forster’s definition, plot consists of causally connected story events and “demands intelligence and memory” of readers to solve the “mystery” it presents.\(^{23}\) This focus on the causal characteristic of plot can be found in the works of many narrative theorists, including Aristotle,

---


\(^{23}\) Ibid., 83.
who differentiates between necessary and probable dimensions of causality and Barthes, who deems the “post hoc, ergo propter hoc” fallacy, i.e. the conflation of sequence and consequence, the “mainspring of narrative.”

Similarly, Lotman’s use of the Russian formalist term *sjužet* to describe the transgressive salience that sets a plot in motion and constitutes a narrative event implies a causal relationship between successive story events. The common Western conception of plot as a progression throughout the text, as a facilitator of the mental operations of readers, hinges on this presumption that standard plots establish causality.

It would be tempting to consider life writing genres such as autobiography and memoir to be excluded from these classic narratological conceptions of plot. Their contents, after all, are not plucked from the author’s mind as pure fiction, but rather represent a rendering of actual, non-narrative life in prose form. Yet scholarship regarding autobiographical writing consistently deems continuity and causality as hallmarks of autobiography and autofiction as well as of fiction. Wilhelm Dilthey’s conception of autobiography foregrounds the necessity of selection in creating autobiographical works, arguing that the genre involves identifying moments of experience that retrospectively appear relevant to one’s entire life course and fitting these parts into a whole by ascribing to them interconnection and causality.

Thus, according to Dilthey, autobiography constructs an individual life as a coherent and meaningful whole through the interpreting position of the narrative present, which renders past events into a meaningful plot and imputes “Sinn” to

contingency. In his seminal *Voraussetzungen und Grenzen der Autobiographie*, Georges Gusdorf specifically identifies the imputation of both continuity and causality as central to autobiography, stating that “[d]er Verfasser einer Autobiographie stellt sich die Aufgabe, seine eigene Geschichte zu erzählen; es geht ihm darum, die verstreuten Elemente seines persönlichen Lebens zu sammeln und sie in einer Gesamtskizze geordnet darzustellen.” Though she emphasizes the active authorial shaping of such continuity and causality more than Gusdorf, Ingrid Aichinger similarly views the portrayal of “[d]ie Entwicklung eines Menschenlebens” and the establishment of “sinnvollen Zusammenhängen” to be defining aspects of the autobiographical genre. While more recent scholarship has transcended the classical model of autobiographical identity as deriving from a coherent retrospective narrative, the close nexus between narrative, identity, and the genre or practice of autobiography continues to be recognized as paramount. Indeed, while the role and construction of narrative in autobiography has been examined and interrogated, its significance and ubiquity is such that in modernity, life narrative “ist zu […] einem allgemeinen kulturellen Wissensmuster geworden.” Honigmann’s works, however, which boast little by way of

---

27 Ibid., 222.
30 See, for instance: Dünne and Moser’s 2008 *Automedicalität: Subjektkonstitution in Schrift, Bild und neuen Medien* for an examination of non-linearity, intermediatelity, and new media in relation to autobiographical narrative and identity; Astrid Erll et al.’s 2003 *Literatur – Erinnerung – Identität* for cognitivist approaches; and Markowitsch and Welzer’s 2005 *Das autobiographische Gedächtnis* for an examination of the neurobiological foundations of autobiographical memory and identity.
continuity and causality, do not easily fit with either traditional or more recent conceptions of autobiographical writing.

In addition to their scarcity of continuity and causality, Honigmann’s works are also distinct from common conceptions both of autobiography and of plot in their lack of telos, the very narrative element from which continuity and causality draw their power. By necessity, autobiographical writing is teleologically ordered, as the moments of experience selected from one’s life are sequentially arranged and causally linked into a narrative event that develops toward a certain goal, presented as a preordained objective that had to be reached. For plots of narratives outside of the realm of life writing, the importance of telos is often emphasized as well. Closure has long been considered the most consequential element in the Aristotelian narrative sequence of beginning, middle, and end, as the arc of tension created throughout the plot leads to and resolves in this section. Similarly, Frank Kermode describes plot thusly: “The click’s tick-tock I take to be a model of what we call a plot, an organization that humanizes time by giving it form.” Kermode relates the “tock” of a narrative to its ending and argues that it is analogous to death, a juxtaposition mirrored in Barthes’s *The Pleasure of the Text*. The importance of endings in relation to plot is also stressed in the work of Peter Brooks, who inscribes it within a psychoanalytical model. Drawing on Freud’s pleasure principle, Brooks discerns in reading a “desire for the end reached only through the at least minimally complicated detour (i.e. retardations and repetitions), the intentional deviance, [… ] which is the plot of narrative.”

---

Beginning in the 1980s, however, feminist literary scholars began questioning narratological models of plot for a variety of reasons, ranging from the purported similarity between traditional plot models and the cisgender male sex act (Susan Winnett) to arguments that the classical teleological endpoints of Western plots—marriage or death—reinforce sexist societal norms (Margaret Homans; Rachel Blau DuPlessis), to the idea that narratives inherently and necessarily inscribe the subject as male and the object, obstacle, or space as female (Teresa de Lauretis). Perhaps the most pronounced reason beyond this expanding feminist distrust of narrative plot models was their inadequacy when it came to describing what was, in this era of second-wave feminism, often referred to as “women’s writing.” In what would later be seen as one of the two inaugural works of feminist narratology, Susan Lanser raises this concern before arguing, “If again and again scholars of women’s writing must speak in terms of the ‘plotless,’ [...] then perhaps something is wrong with the notions of plot that have followed from Propp’s morphology. Perhaps narratology has been mistaken in trying to arrive at a single definition and description of plot.”

Drawing out the pernicious implications of such a view of writing by women as “plotless,” Nancy Miller argues that “[t]he attack on female plots and plausibilities assumes that women writers cannot or will not obey the rules of fiction,” and that these “plotless” works by women “are taken to be not merely inferior modalities of production but deviations from some obvious truth.”

Spurred by these feminist challenges and the greater shift they prompted away from the formalist constraints of structuralist narratology to the transactions between narratives and the world in which they are created and received, many narratologists outside of the realm of feminist narratology began questioning the notion of delineated plot structures as a universal or

comprehensive framework for narrative. Eschewing the concrete and unyielding notion of plot structure, theorists began embracing the scalar concept of narrativity. A variable quality rather than a necessary component or set of components by which narrative is defined, narrativity is the degree to which something can be deemed “more or less storylike.” As a narratological concept, narrativity first appears in the 1980s, but did not gain much scholarly traction until the turn of the millennium, at which point it became one of the central terms in narrative analytics. Today, narrativity boasts a lively range of conceptual roles, and though its status as a scalar phenomenon subject to gradation differentiates it from more structuralist theories of plot, the same factors of continuity, teleology, and causality that have been classically associated with plot appear with great frequency in contemporary discussions of narrativity as well. Meir Sternberg, for instance, sees narrativity as deriving in large part from “sequentiality,” as does Keith Cohen. Elsewhere, Sternberg goes as far as to identify an overarching “temporality/teleology/narrativity crux” that governs narrative. Brian Richardson, meanwhile, argues that a sense of causal agency is “a necessary condition for narrativity,” a view echoed by Mieke Bal, David Bordwell, and Peter Rabinowitz. And just as narrative plots aid in our construction of identity, so too does narrativity foster the construction of knowledge. In fact, Hayden White understands narrativity as a

37 David Herman, Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 91.
“panglobal fact of culture,” without which there is no conveying knowledge as meaning. To him, meaning, knowledge, and with it, self-knowledge, can only emerge when events have been “emplotted” with “the formal coherency that only stories can possess.”

Whether analyzing Honigmann’s autofiction through the traditional lens of plot or through the more flexible notion of narrativity, her works do not adhere to accepted conceptions of narrative. There is no discernable chronology—indeed, the narrator often returns to the same anecdote or story many times over—nor is there a sense of causality and none of her works, whether novels, short stories, or essays, build toward a resolution, even the ones, like Ein Kapitel aus meinem Leben, that purport to do so. They correspond with no model of plot and in terms of narrativity, they most easily align with Brian McHale’s notion of “weak narrativity,” which involves, “telling stories ‘poorly,’ distractedly, with much irrelevance and indeterminancy, in such a way as to evoke narrative coherence while at the same time withholding commitment to it and undermining confidence in it.” This concept of McHale’s aptly echoes Lilla Balint’s description of the Ein Kapitel in which she writes that the narrator constantly and deliberately takes the wind out of the story’s sails.

If narrative—defined either through plot or narrativity—is how we construct self-knowledge and identity, then what self-knowledge and what identity can be gleaned from the plotlessness and weak narrativity of Honigmann’s works? With regard to autobiographical writing, Aichinger contends that “das Wesen der Selbstdarstellung” lies “weniger in einer Sinnfindung, sondern in der Suche danach” and that such a search implies a certain degree

---

43 Balint, 39.
of “Selbstschöpfung.” For many German Jewish authors of the second and third generations, this search for a sense of identity and self occurs via an exploration of the familial past, either through the first-person accounts that Aleida Assmann calls “conversational remembering,” as is the case with Gila Lustiger’s novel discussed in the next chapter, or through historical research, as is the case with Katja Petrowskaja’s story collection discussed in the final chapter. Their writing consists largely of both stories from their parents’ and grandparents’ lives as well as from their own attempts at attaining these stories, reflecting the Benjaminian notion that, when it comes to memory, the process of unearthing the past is just as important as the excavated stories and facts themselves. Honigmann, however, is interested in neither uncovered mnemonic artifacts nor the metaphorical “behutsame, tastende Spatenstich ins dunkle Erdreich” that leads to them. She records little by way of concrete information about her parents’ or other relatives’ lives and has no interest in tracking down such information, whether through eyewitness accounts or archival research. “Ich hätte es tun können,” she writes about the possibility of such an investigation, “aber ich habe es nicht getan.”

For Honigmann, identity does not stem from the familial past or traumatic history, but rather is constantly created and recreated in the present. To a degree, this identity creation occurs in her actual life in the Jewish community she has purposefully embedded herself within. But far more than in life, Honigmann’s sense of self stems from the act of writing. Indeed, in an essay on the topic of autofiction, Honigmann states, “Ich möchte gerne in meiner Eigenart des Schreibens...”

---

44 Aichinger, 194, 185.
47 Honigmann, Ein Kapitel aus meinem Leben (2004), 142.
This sentiment that Honigmann’s character and selfhood derive in greater part from her writing than from her lived experiences is reflected in her works. *Roman von einem Kinde; Damals, dann und danach; Ein Kapitel aus meinem Leben*: all three constitute meditations on various identities and their intersections. Their unconventional, meandering plots, their weak narrativity, their lack of continuity and causality and their eschewal of satisfying endings indicates, not that Honigmann “cannot or will not obey the rules of fiction”—the common implication observed by Miller about the plots of women’s writing—but rather that for the narrators of Honigmann’s works, identity is complex; it cannot be easily summed up or resolved by a flashback or a climax. As the narrator navigates the thorny contradictions of her identity—those that arise from being a second-generation German Jew or a woman that studies the Torah and Talmud in a traditional Jewish setting or a parent responsible for transmitting cultural and familial memory that she has only received piecemeal and riddled with gaps—she engages in an ongoing reexamination and renegotiation of identity and self-knowledge. Honigmann’s disruptions of conventional paradigms of plot or notions of narrativity serve to foreground the constructed nature of identity and self-knowledge as well as the powerful role that narrative and writing play in this construction.

**ii. Constructing Identity through Text**

Honigmann’s penchant for portraying the construction of identity and self-knowledge in all its complexity has been much noted by scholars. Christina Guenther, for instance, states that

---

“[c]entral to Honigmann’s texts is the construction of identity,” and that her texts “reflect postmodern theories of identity construction, including the fragmentary nature of identity through explorations of the interplay of memory with historical, cultural, religious, familial, ethnic, and gendered categories of identity.”\textsuperscript{49} Similarly, Emily Jeremiah remarks that “Honigmann destabilizes the idea of a ‘whole identity’ and explores ethnicity, and Jewishness in particular, as a complex construct.”\textsuperscript{50} This idea is reflected as well in the work of Thomas Nolden, who argues that Honigmann has no interest in drawing overly pat identitarian conclusions from either her experiences or those of her ancestors, and indeed that her writing is distinct from that of her contemporaries in “ihrem Verzicht auf oder ihrer Abneigung gegenüber den weit ausholenden Geschichtsepen, in denen so viele ihrer Zeitgenossen die genealogischen Abfolgen rekonstruieren, die ihre Familiengeschichte beeinflusst hatten.”\textsuperscript{51} Yet while so much scholarly work has focused on Honigmann’s complex and nuanced explorations of identity, little of it examines the role texts, writing, and narrative plays in these constructions of identity and of the self.

Identity and self-knowledge in the works of Barbara Honigmann are almost exclusively constructed in the realm of the textual. At the meta-level, this seems obvious, as text is the medium through which Honigmann’s works are realized. But even at the level of plot, identity is formed through writing and reading texts much more than through any other means, including those that are commonly associated with identity and belonging. Material objects, for instance, even those one might expect to be imbued with meaning or significance, are portrayed unsentimentally. Two

\textsuperscript{50} Emily Jeremiah, “Facing the Other: Barbara Honigmann and Jewish Nomadic Ethics,” in \textit{Nomadic Ethics in Contemporary Women’s Writing in German: Strange Subjects}, (Rochester: Boydell and Brewer, 2012): 167.
separate anecdotes in two separates books by Honigmann make this abundantly clear. The story “Gräber in London” from Damals is the first of Honigmann’s works to explore her complicated relationship with her mother and, in turn, her mother’s complicated relationship with her parents. In it, the narrator tells of a gold necklace with a black pearl that she found as a child in mother’s possessions and was subsequently given. Sometime later, the child Barbara loses the necklace in the tumult of the school locker room and describes her mother’s reaction upon finding out about the missing necklace as brusque and unemotional: “Meine Mutter sagte ganz lakonisch: es war das einzige was ich noch von meiner Mutter besaß, und die hatte sie noch von ihrer Mutter, deiner Großmutter.” Rather than using this family heirloom as an opportunity to wax poetic about family memory or identity, the topic is dropped. Neither the narrated nor narrating selves present in Honigmann’s works delve further into the subject and her mother brushes it off as well, with the last sentence of this dispassionately described anecdote simply stating, “Die Kette mit der schwarzen Perle wurde nie mehr erwähnt.”

A similar tale appears in Ein Kapitel aus meinem Leben. Here, the narrator describes a hat bought by her mother on a trip to Paris after the war. This would be the last time her mother stepped foot in the city, which had been the setting of a great portion of her life. Her mother holds onto it for a while, but then, like the pearl necklace, the hat is lost by a school-aged Barbara: “Dieser letzte Pariser Hut gehörte zu den wenigen Dingen, nein, war wahrscheinlich das einzige Stück aus dem Besitz meiner Mutter, das sie, obwohl es nutzlos, also überflüssig geworden war, über all die Jahre noch in Berlin aufhob. Ich habe ihn dann verloren.” The narrator goes on to describe the chaotic school theater situation in which the hat was lost, but her prose is matter-of-fact and devoid of

52 Honigmann, Damals, dann und danach (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1999), 26.
53 Ibid.
54 Honigmann, Ein Kapitel aus meinem Leben, (2004), 85.
sentimentality. These two anecdotes are remarkable not only for their curious similarity, but also for this absolute lack of emotion on the part of either the characters or the narrator. Both the necklace and the Parisian hat constitute the last material connection to a lost past and, as such, could be expected to take on meaning for either the narrator or her mother; these are objects with a strong potential for sentimentality. Yet the narrator’s dry descriptions of the objects and their misplacements do not indulge the reader’s impulses, instead defying their affective expectations. The inclusion of these anecdotes when Honigmann could so easily have omitted them, however, creates significance out of their insignificance, as it makes apparent the non-value of material objects in Honigmann’s mnemonic economy.

Identity construction through Heimat, or the connection to a specific physical location is likewise negated again and again in Honigmann’s works, with Jeremiah writing that the concept of Heimat appears in Honigmann’s writing only as an “exclusionary construct” or an “absent referent.” While biking through Strasbourg with her husband Peter, the narrator of “Vom meinem Urgroßvater, meinem Großvater, meinem Vater und von mir” questions whether they belong in France, the country of their current residence, or in Germany, the country of their origins, still visible from their location on the border between the two lands. Peter’s answer to this complicated question of belonging that is mired in history, religion, nationality, and geography is simple: “das ist auch nicht so wichtig, wir gehören eben an unseren Schreibtisch.” Mirroring the sentiments of many German Jewish writers before her, identity constructed around belonging to a specific nation or place is here forsworn in exchange for identity constructed around writing, something reinforced by the narrator’s statement that she only begin to write once she had loosed herself from

55 Jeremiah, 174, 178.
56 Barbara Honigmann, Damals, dann und danach, 39.
her complicated relationship to her ostensible Heimat, Germany: “Als ich nun in das andere Land gekommen war, wenn auch nur drei Straßen hinter der Grenze, habe auch ich zu schreiben begonnen, oder sagen wir, ‘richtig’ zu schreiben.”

While it might be tempting to attribute the narrator’s unease in identifying with Germany to her Jewishness, her lack of connection to physical locations extends beyond this apparent German-Jewish conflict. Indeed, she explicitly notes that her Jewish identity is similarly disconnected from physical places when she states in another story in Damals (“Meine sefardischen Freundinnen”) that she and her Sephardic friends “grenzen uns deutlich von denen ab, die eine Pilgerfahrt nach Jerusalem oder nach Auschwitz unternehmen müssen, um sich als Juden fühlen zu können.” Jerusalem and Auschwitz function in this sentence as much more than physical locations; they are cultural signifiers on a larger scale, standing for Jewish self-determination and Jewish suffering, respectively. But it is notable nonetheless that the narrator presents these cultural concepts in the form of the places she sees as most readily symbolizing them. Yaniv Feller understands this as “eine eindeutige Ablehnung von bestimmten physischen Orten als Träger von Religiosität,” but when taken together with the narrator’s similarly fraught relationship with Germany and Strasbourg, the rejection extends beyond physical places as bearers of religiosity to a rejection of physical places as bearers of identity and belonging altogether.

Far more than physical locations, the narrator’s Jewish identity is constructed around texts. As her parents lived mostly entirely assimilated lives in the GDR, the narrator’s knowledge of Judaism derives not from familial tradition or lore, but rather from books, as is made evident the

57 Ibid., 46.
58 Ibid., 68.
conversation about the library of the Jewish Community of Berlin that she and her husband have with Gershom Scholem during his visit in “Doppeltes Grab”: “Dort habe er die ersten Bücher jüdischen Wissens ausgeliehen, sagte Scholem, und wir sagten: wir auch. Und damit habe eigentlich alles angefangen, und wir sagten: bei uns auch.”

But it is not only the narrator’s initial relationship to Judaism that is textually constituted; throughout her adolescence and adulthood, writing and reading play the central role in her Jewishness. As a teenager, the narrator writes, her Jewish identity was largely constructed around her relationship with other Jewish teenagers, either those who lived near her in Berlin or the children of her parents’ friends, many of whom lived in Vienna. Because visits to Vienna were rare, the medium of friendship with the teenagers there developed largely through writing letters, while the narrator explains that the relationship with her Jewish friends in Berlin had “etwas Konspiratives und wir lasen die Bibel auf hebräisch wie ein verbotenes Buch.”

Even as an adult in Strasbourg, living in an insular pocket of traditional Judaism, the narrator’s relationship to Judaism and to her Jewish friends revolves around the reading and interpretation of texts. Two of the stories that depict the narrator’s life, “Bonsoir, Madame Benhamou” from Roman and “Meine sefardischen Freundinnen” from Damals, describe the casual weekly Torah study that the narrator engages in: “und wir lesen die Tora mit Raschis Kommentar, Wort für Wort, Satz für Satz, und Madame Benhamou erläutert und kommentiert noch aus anderen Quellen, dann diskutieren wir, Wort für Wort und Satz für Satz, und wir streiten uns über Moses und Aron, als ob es heute in der Zeitung gestanden hätte.”

It is through this word-for-word Torah study and dissection that the narrator’s friendship with the other women evolves,

---

60 Honigmann, Damals, dann und danach, 93.
61 Ibid., 94, 29.
that she finds her sense of belonging in her Strasbourg community, and that she establishes her connection to Judaism.

In Honigmann’s texts, it is not only Jewishness that is textually contingent, but Germanness as well. After a lengthy examination of her identity as a Jew in “Selbstporträt einer Jüdin,” the narrator states that while she feel more Jewish than German, “kulturell gehöre ich wohl zu Deutschland und zu sonst gar nichts.”\(^{63}\) The reason for this, of course, is literary: “Ich schreibe nicht nur auf deutsch, sondern die Literatur, die mich geformt und gebildet hat, ist die deutsche Literatur, und ich beziehe mich auf sie, in allem was ich schreibe, auf Goethe, auf Kleist, auf Grimms Märchen und auf die deutsche Romantik.”\(^{64}\) Far from the people or the landscape, what connects the narrator to Germany is the German literature that constitutes her formative reading experiences, much like Heine, Canetti, and Reich-Ranicki before her.\(^{65}\) She is German not because of her legal citizenship, but because the German language and its literature have so permeated her identity and sense of self. In a similar vein, the narrator’s connection to both her familial past and present is propelled by writing and texts. As the narrator explains in Damals, her familial relationships did not extend beyond the edges of her nuclear family for much of her life. This changed, however, with the 1991 publication of Eine Liebe aus nichts, Honigmann’s autobiographical novel detailing the relationship between the protagonist and her father. It was the writing of this book, the narrator states in “Gräber in London,” that caused her familial network to bloom: “Dann veröffentlichte ich das Buch, und, als ob es ein Anruf gewesen wäre, bekam ich viel

\(^{63}\) Honigmann, Damals, dann und danach, 17.
\(^{64}\) Ibid., 18.
\(^{65}\) Honigmann is not alone in this Jewish construction of German identity through literature. For a more in-depth examination of this phenomenon, see: Anthony D. Kauders, “The Emotional Geography of a Lost Space: Germany as an Object of Jewish Attachment after 1945,” in Heimat. At the Intersection of Memory and Space, ed. Friederike Eigler and Jens Kugele (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012), 193-207.
Post, Antwort sozusagen von den verlorenen Cousins und Cousinsinnen meines Vaters oder deren Kinder, aus England, aus Amerika.”66 It is the book about the narrator’s father, not her father himself, that forges these familial connections.

iv. The Genres of Memory

Texts, their creation, and their consumption are not just featured in the construction and maintenance of all the narrator’s myriad identities. In her works, Honigmann actively uses textual genres as a means of organizing and imbuing her life and those of her parents with meaning. Words that are used to signify and classify texts appear with astounding frequency in Honigmann’s works. Given their appearance in the titles of her works, Roman and Kapitel are the most obvious examples, but Mythos, Legende, Epos, and Brief can also be found in abundance in Honigmann’s writing. Rather than being sprinkled haphazardly throughout her works, the use of each of these various terms is clustered around a specific concept or topic, meaning that what constitutes a Roman is different than what constitutes a Kapitel or an Epos. Indeed, each of these terms has a carefully calibrated valence that is used by Honigmann to signify its specific relevance in relation to her constructed identity and sense of self.

Aside from the title of Roman von einem Kinde, the terms Roman and Kapitel appear exclusively in Ein Kapitel aus meinem Leben, with the titular Kapitel referring to the part of Litzy Kohlmann’s life she spent married to Kim Philby and performing espionage on behalf of the Soviet government. This use of the term originates with Litzy herself and in the first half of the book, appears most usually in the titular phrase “ein Kapitel aus meinem Leben” or “ein Kapitel aus

66 Honigmann, Damals, dann und danach, 33.
ihrem Leben.” Eventually, however, the narrator adopts the word herself and adapts its usage to fit her own aims. The Kim Philby chapter of her mother’s life, the chapter of “Kassibern, Kontaktmännern, Codeworten und verschluckten Dokumenten,” takes place largely in Paris, but parallel to this spy narrative runs another narrative, which also takes place in Paris. This is the narrative of Litzy’s Parisian social life, replete with grand parties, large groups of friends, elegant fashion, and a Dutch lover. The narrator differentiates between these two Parises, with the one marked by espionage dubbed the “Pariser ‘Kapitel’” in keeping with her mother’s nomenclature, and the one marked by opulence the “Paris-Roman.”

“Der Paris-Roman und das Pariser ‘Kapitel’ fielen in den Erzählungen meiner Mutter völlig auseinander,” the narrator states, before delving into further detail about the generic distances between the two: “das Pariser ‘Kapitel’ war kurz und knapp und blieb ohne Ausschmückungen. Der Paris-Roman hingegen, der von Festen und Freunden und Hüten und ihrem holländischen Geliebten handelte, umfaßte mehrere Bände.”

The use of this chapter-versus-novel metaphor most obviously serves to delineate the difference in length and complexity that Honigmann addresses here. The stories the narrator’s mother tells from the “Paris novel” are both greater in number and more richly embroidered than those from the “Paris chapter,” which correlates perfectly to the terminology. Novels are longer and, due to this, provide greater opportunity for embellishment than a single chapter.

Yet the terms “novel” and “chapter” have a second, less conspicuous meaning as well: a chapter is one part of a longer work. It is one segment of a sequence that continues either before it, after it, or both. There is no expectation in a chapter that loose ends would be tied up or that the

---

67 Honigmann, Ein Kapitel aus meinem Leben, (2004), 27, 60, 75, among others.
68 Ibid., 76.
69 Ibid., 87.
70 Ibid., 86, 87.
reader would receive any sense of closure. A novel, however, is a completed whole in and of itself. It need bear no relation to any other novel or literary work; it is a separate and independent entity; it ends. Such is the nature of Litzy Kohlmann’s parallel Paris narratives as well. The Paris chapter, the one including her marriage to Kim Philby and her work as a Soviet spy, is regarded by both Litzy and her daughter as a time that, while extraordinary, comprises only a small portion of Litzy’s much more extensive life. The stories of the Paris chapter are short and unembellished and it is soon succeeded by the London chapter, the Berlin chapter, the Vienna chapter. It is a part of the trajectory of Litzy’s life as she lived it. The Paris novel, on the other hand, stands outside of time. Rather than being one unit on an ongoing sequence, a unit that can be left behind and moved on from, the Paris novel is a completed work unto itself. It has a beginning, a middle, and a distinct end—Litzy’s move from Paris to London—and this boundary remains, for the rest of Litzy’s life, unbreachable. She returns to Paris a single time after the end of the war and, finding few remnants of her previous world of extravagance and soirees, vows never to return again. Her social connections from this time period are similarly enclosed within the limits of the Paris novel. She does not seek out any erstwhile friends or acquaintances and even her Dutch lover, Pieter, with whom she exchanges letters until her death, is never again seen in person by Litzy, “als ob sie sich außerhalb des Pariser Romans nicht wiederbegegnen mochten.”

In addition to signifying length and closure, Honigmann’s use of the term “novel” and its juxtaposition with “chapter” indicates another facet of the stories and anecdotes Litzy tells from this time period: their alignment with her own fantasies. That the stories from the Paris novel are so much greater in volume and richer in detail is not due merely to their superior tellability. Indeed, the stories from the Paris chapter, those stories “der Konspiration, der Kassiber, der Treffen mit

71 Ibid., 89.
Kontrolloffizieren und Nachrichtenübergaben,” would appear on their face to generate more narrative tension, more action, and more tellability, than the stories from the Paris novel, which tell merely of social gatherings, grand fashions, friendships, and lovers. But is it not the ability to entertain nor the quality of the narrative that drives Litzy to tell these stories time and time again. It is the fact that they present the version of herself that she finds the most agreeable. The Paris novel, the narrator states, is a novel “zu dem meine Mutter ihr Leben gerne umgedichtet hätte.” These, in contrast to the Paris chapter tales, are not the stories of Litzy’s life as she lived it, but rather of her life as she wished she had lived it. The Paris novel becomes a site in which Litzy can reimagine her life, can cling to a short moment in time—the narrator explains that this was the portion of her mother’s life that “an Jahren das kürzeste war”—and spin out of it an entire “novel” in which her fictionalized self can live a fictionalized version of her life. The Paris-Roman then, is a novel not only due to the volume of stories contained in it, or its disconnection from the rest of Litzy’s complicated life, but also because it is the place in which her fantasies about her life can play out, because it is a fiction. As the narrator explains, it is the story “eines Lebens, das, jedenfalls in ihrer Rückschau, vom Ende her betrachtet, vielleicht, besser zu ihr gepaßt hätte.” Like novels in general, the Paris novel provides an escape from Litzy’s actual life. It stands separate from her work as a spy, from her exile during WWII, from the realities of everyday postwar life in the GDR—from all those little chapters that assemble into a sequence and a life—and becomes instead a comforting alternative world to immerse herself in.

72 Ibid., 86.
73 Ibid.
74 Ibid., 85.
75 Ibid., 86.
As other terms borrowed from literary genres, *Legende* and *Epos* play a similar role in Honigmann’s writing to *Roman*; they, too, indicate the powerful effect that weaving stories out of memory and history can have on both the teller and receiver of these tales. But rather than offering an escapist fantasy for a singular person, as the Paris novel does, the stories characterized by the narrator as legends and epics are marked, as those genres typically are, by mythologization, by gaps and fragments, and by community. Like *Roman* and *Kapitel*, each of these other terms functions in a specific sense in Honigmann’s writing. *Epos* boasts the narrowest application, appearing only in *Ein Kapitel aus meinem Leben* in reference to any story from the years her parents spent in exile in London: “Auch heute höre ich England, mit den Stimmen meiner Mutter, meines Vaters und ihrer Freunde, als großes Epos aus immer wiederholten und immer neu beleuchteten Erzählungen und Beschreibungen, Anekdoten und Betrachtungen.”

That this *England-Epos*, as the narrator refers to it elsewhere, involves stories not only from the narrator’s mother, but from both her parents as well as their friends points to the communal nature of these myth-related genres. The development of the novel corresponds to the development of Western notions of individuality and subjectivity; it is a literary form that is most often produced and consumed by individuals. Myths, legends, and epics, on the other hand, have their origins in the spoken word. They were, for many centuries, told aloud to groups of people, passed from audience to audience with slight variations. Far more than the fantasies and desires of a single person, they represented those of an entire society. Such is the difference between *Roman* and *Epos* in Honigmann’s writing as well. The Paris novel of her mother’s interwar days is created solely by her mother and consumed solely by the narrator. The England epic, in contrast, is produced by a

---

76 Ibid., 94.
77 Ibid., 108.
community of people, the narrator’s parents and their friends. It takes form from the memories of a wide group of individuals and serves not only the narrator, but her parents, their friends, and their friends’ children as well.

The same communal crafting and sharing of stories is seen in the narrator’s use of the term *Legende*. This denomination has a much wider usage in Honigmann’s works than the England-specific *Epos*, being applied to any stories and anecdotes that take place in the distant past, most often in the childhood of her parents or her parents’ friends. Though her mother does not speak often of her childhood in the Austro-Hungarian countryside, what she does say are “[n]ur ein paar Legenden.” The physical locations in which the narrator’s family history play out “sind also schon in einer fernen Vergangenheit untergegangen, und existieren nur noch in Legenden und Erzählungen oder Fragmenten von Erzählungen.” The narrator’s peers—the children of her parents’ friends, all of whom are either Jewish or were otherwise persecuted under the Nazi regime—receive similarly fragmented stories from their parents’ pasts, as the narrator explains: “Die Geschichte unserer Eltern kannten wir aber nur bruchstückhaft, und das Judentum überhaupt nicht. Wir forschten keiner Wahrheit nach und lebten mit Legenden.” In addition to the social aspect of storytelling, another marker of the narrator’s use of both *Epos* and *Legende* is this piecemeal nature of the stories in question. The history of the narrator’s parents and those of her friends is relayed only “bruchstückhaft,” the stories of countries, cities, and homes inhabited long ago are mere “Fragmenten von Erzählungen,” even her parents’ tales from the great England epic are fragmentary, marked by silence as much as by communication: “In diesem Gesang ist England

---

78 Honigmann, *Damals, dann und danach*, 21.
79 Ibid., 89.
80 Ibid., 27.
etwas Zusammenhängendes aus Gesagtem und Ungesagtem.”

But for the narrator and her peers, these fragments and gaps are unconcerning; they have no interest in researching factual history, choosing instead to live contentedly and to construct their senses of self “mit Legenden.”

This disinterest in truth or fact in relation to these legends, epics, and myths of family history has been remarked on by other scholars. Balint reads in the narrator’s deployment of these terms a certain tongue-in-cheek playfulness vis-a-vis her familial past, stating that the narrator’s use “des Epos-Begriffs versucht gerade diesen Vergangenheitsfetischismus auf spielerische Art aufs Korn zu nehmen.”

But Balint also stresses that these terms imply more than mere impishness: “Einerseits nimmt der Epos-Begriff hier also eine ironische Valenz an, andererseits wird mit ihm, die unüberbrückbare Distanz zu dieser Vergangenheit artikuliert.”

Gsoels-Lorensen comments on this as well, when she argues that the terminology of “Legende” and “Mythos” in Honigmann’s writing “does not capitalize on the illusory or false character of these stories, but endows them with a heightened performance value, perhaps even a ritualistic component, involving narration and time in their own way.”

Gsoels-Lorensen’s interpretation highlights the contrast between the narrator’s legends and epics and Litzy’s “Paris-Roman,” which, as an alternative imagining of Litzy’s life, relies wholly on the illusory nature of the events being narrativized. These mythological genres function differently, however. They involve, as Gsoels-Lorensen observes, a performance, which in turn requires the aforementioned communal audience. But moreover, also noted by Gsoels-Lorensen, they play with narration and time. In the indifference to historical fact that the narrator indicates and Gsoels-Lorensen explores, it is

---

81 Honigmann, Ein Kapitel aus meinem Leben (2004), 94.
82 Balint, 43.
83 Ibid.
84 Gsoels-Lorensen, 375.
apparent that, despite these stories taking place in the distant past, the most important time period for these legends and myths is the moment of their recitation. At issue is not what factually happened in their parents’ childhoods or during the war, but rather what meaning can be derived from these memories at the time of their telling. Much like actual myths, epics, and legends, whose origins and factual validities are often murky if not entirely unknown, the Legende, Epen, and Mythen of Honigmannian discourse rely far more on their constant retellings and reinterpretations than on their historical accuracy to create meaning. The mere fact that these are the stories that are constantly told and retold, that they are so pervasive and so insistent, marks them, like myth, as significant and meaningful.

Despite the very different valences that these text-related terms—Roman, Kapitel, Epos, Legende, Mythos—have within Honigmann’s writing, their constant and consistent presence in her works points to a higher meaning beyond those specificities outlined here. For someone who so firmly resists traditional narrative structures in her writing, it is curious how wholeheartedly she embraces and employs terminology that relates directly to conventional narrative paradigms. Honigmann herself has asserted the powerful role of writing in the construction of a person’s sense of self or identity. In the essay on autofiction referenced earlier, she asserts, “Alle Menschen haben eigenartige Lebensgeschichten. Es kommt aber darauf an, sie im Schreiben zu verändern.”85 Yfaat Weiss understands this declaration as “der Schlüssel zum Verständnis der Schriften Barbara Honigmanns, zu einem Werk, das immer wieder und wieder zur gleichen Lebensgeschichte zurückkehrt und diese wiederholt, sie allerdings fortwährend in verschiedene Versionen verändert

This reinterpretabillity that Weiss perceives in the events presented in Honigmann’s writing can be seen in her constant use of terms like novel, chapter, legend, myth, and epic as well. The “Schreiben” that Honigmann argues is so vital to someone’s self-construction does not merely denote language, even written language, but narrative structures as well. Though Honigmann may not rely on conventional plot structures in her own narratives, she addresses them on a meta-level, using them as a means to organize and give meaning to life. Rather than simply relaying her parents’ stories from wartime London, for example, she examines how these stories are told and identifies them as all parts of a distant and ancient epic. Such categorization imbues the London stories with a more heightened significance than would be achieved with their mere factual retelling. It sets them in conversation not only with other stories from England in the Second World War, but with the entire genre of myth, telling us not only what happened, but also what role these events have played in the lives of its participants and their descendants. In this way, these various textual terms become shortcuts to meaning-making, lending the reader familiar lenses through which to view specific stories and anecdotes.

But while this narrative terminology offers long-established frames of meaning with which to understand and interpret Honigmann’s various stories, it also simultaneously works against the ossification of any fixed or stable meaning. Novel, chapter, legend, epic, myth: all of these terms relate heavily to plot structure and generally produce an expectation in the reader of development and progress. Even if a work’s plot points are not presented chronologically, it is expected that there be a decipherable sequence. The various “texts” of Honigmann’s works, however, defy such plots of progress. There are no linear trajectories, no individual development or growth. There is

---

no progress. The Honigmannian texts—the Paris chapter and the Paris novel, the England epic, the various myths and legends told by her parents and their friends—are narratively revisited time and time again, by their various diegetic-level tellers and by Honigmann’s narrators. By rendering life events as texts, endlessly able to be told again and interpreted anew, Honigmann refuses the Western paradigm of progress that is so firmly embedded in traditional models of plot. Honigmann’s works have no definable beginnings, middles, and ends not due, to borrow a phrase from Miller, to an inability to adhere to the rules of (auto)fiction, but because they are disinterested in shoehorning chaotic and disordered lives into tidy plots that lead to stable, teleological endpoints. Her use of textual terms like novel and legend may suggest frameworks of meaning-making to the reader, but even these allow for a myriad of meanings that can be made. Outside the importance of writing and storytelling, there is no stable or fixed meaning to be gleaned from Honigmann’s work.

The multiplex identity and sense of self that is constructed in Honigmann’s works is therefore similarly in flux. Unlike many other Jewish authors, including the other two whose works are explored in this dissertation, Honigmann’s sense of Jewishness derives not from a connection to Jewish ancestors or heritage. Instead, her Jewish identity is constantly created and recreated in the present, largely untethered from the past. For someone of her generation of German Jews, in fact, her writing is conspicuously not postmemorial. Though the narrator delves into the sometimes traumatic life stories of her mother and father, her identity as a Jew has little to do with them. She writes in one story in *Damals, dann und danach*, “Jüdisches Wissen hatten mir meine Eltern verschwiegen oder hatten es selbst nicht gehabt.” A few stories later, this disconnect between her sense of Jewishness and her familial heritage is reinforced when she describes her entry into

---

87 Honigmann, *Damals, dann und danach*, 15.
the world of Jewish religious learning and practice as “die Wiedereroberung [meines] Judentums aus dem Nichts.”

The slight sense of Jewishness she does glean from the past—the connection or kinship she feels in relation to the stories her parents and their Jewish friends tell of their experiences in the interwar years or in the Second World War—is drawn from her own transformation of these stories into recognizable and comprehensible texts that can be reread and reinterpreted time and time again in the present. To the narrator, such a relationship to memory and the past is perfectly in keeping with Jewish culture. In an essay that traces the writing of German Jewish woman as defined by Honigmann from Glückel von Hameln to Anne Frank, she explains the Jewish conception of memory thusly: “Das hebräische Wort sachor, der zentrale Begriff im Judentum für Erinnerung, meint ja vor allem die Vergegenwärtigung einer wichtigen Sache oder Handlung, die in einem ritualisierten Akt der Gegenwart gewürdigt wird.”

Honigmann’s distillation of chaotic and disordered history into repeatable, yet transmutable texts corresponds with this notion of memory as “Vergegenwärtigung”: the Kapitel, Roman, Epos, and Legenden of Honigmann’s works represent ritualized storytelling acts that memorialize the past while being firmly rooted in the present.

v. Plot, Birth, and Possibility

The possibility of arriving at a stable meaning through literature or the act of writing is explicitly negated by the narrator, when, a little under halfway through Ein Kapitel, she reveals a request from her mother that was perhaps the original prompt for the writing of this book. The narrator is

---

88 Ibid., 29.
at home in Strasbourg, working in her studio, when her mother, now living in Vienna as she approaches the final years of her life, appears at her door. The two visit the café on the ground floor of the building in which the narrator’s studio is located and the narrator reports: “während sie ihren Tee und ich meinen Kaffee trank, sagte sie, sie wolle mir nun einmal einige Details ‘dieses Kapitels aus meinem Leben’ erzählen, so, wie sie es erlebt habe, und ich soll mir ruhig Notizen machen, denn das sei ihre Version, die sie mich bitte festzuhalten.”

The episode is revisited some twenty pages later, with the narrator employing the same phrasing: “forderte mich meine Mutter plötzlich auf, ‘diese Geschichte’ aufzuschreiben, ‘dieses Kapitel aus meinem Leben’ festzuhalten.” Yet despite this request from her aging mother and the marketing of this book, which claims that Honigmann has fulfilled this request, the narrator resists. Nowhere in the book’s 142 pages is the story of Litzy’s marriage to Kim Philby recorded or “held stable,” to use a more literal translation of her mother’s festhalten. The sections of the book that most acutely describe this “Kapitel” are set apart from Honigmann’s prose and bound by quotation marks; they are presented as direct quotes from Litzy herself. Even here there is little actual story. A few savory details are sprinkled in here and there, but Litzy’s quoted recount largely involves contradicting and setting straight the reports of other writers who have written about Kim Philby. This resistance to actually chronicling her mother’s version of this chapter of her life—the narrator’s refusal “es festzuhalten”—can be read as resistance to the notion that writing can produce, as Litzy wanted, a fixed or stable version of reality.

What Honigmann chooses to include in Ein Kapitel instead furthers this resistance. The stories and anecdotes that are told and retold through the book, interpreted differently each time;

---

90 Honigmann, Ein Kapitel aus meinem Leben (2004), 59-60.
91 Ibid., 78.
92 Ibid., 60-62
the many, seemingly easy-to-prove facts that are unclear about Litzy’s life; the wide gaps that mark her storytelling: *Ein Kapitel* is less the story of Litzy’s life or even of her marriage to Philby and more a meditation on the fundamental unknowability of her mother. The first snippet of information we learn about Litzy is that she is no longer sure of her natural hair color, a detail that is followed in the course of the book by many other uncertainties.\(^93\) The narrator does not know her mother’s true birthdate or death date, and her name, which she changed as nearly as frequently as her hair color, is similarly ambiguous.\(^94\) Her handwriting is inscrutable, her vocabulary idiolectic.\(^95\) The final few paragraphs of the book describe a photo of a WWI soldier that Litzy always claimed was her father, but even this is dubious to the narrator, with the last two sentences of the book reading, “Vielleicht ist es mein Großvater. Vielleicht auch nicht.”\(^96\) But just as the narrator has no interest in researching and recording a factual account of her mother’s relationship with Kim Philby, neither does she desire to resolve these uncertainties, as she explicitly states:

Ich bin nirgends hingereist, hingefahren, hingegangen.
Habe keine Dokumente gesucht, gefunden, gesehen.
Ich habe mit niemandem gesprochen und keinem Menschen Fragen gestellt.
Ich hätte es tun können, aber ich habe es nicht getan.\(^97\)

The narrator could have researched factual information about her mother, could have cleared up many, if not most, of the ambiguities and unknowns surrounding her life, but she consciously chose not to do so. The narrator is unconcerned with uncovering clear answers. Her meandering and unconcluded plots provide no easy conceptions of self or of one’s identity; rather, self-

\(^{93}\) Ibid., 5.
\(^{94}\) Ibid., 44, 43.
\(^{95}\) Ibid., 12; Honigmann, *Roman von einem Kinde*, 120.
\(^{97}\) Ibid., 141.
knowledge is presented as forever in flux, something to be continually revisited and reinterpreted, like texts themselves.

In her article on the relationship between plot and gender, Susan Winnett argues that, in their easy analogy to cisgender male experiences of sex, traditional models of plot are inherently male. As alternative models to this phallocentric conception, Winnett proposes both birth and breastfeeding as models for rereading women’s texts. These two experiences, typically associated with the cisgender female body, “manifest dynamic patterns not unlike those described in the various orgastic sequences” of traditional models of plot.\(^{98}\) Winnett continues, “Yet because they do not culminate in a quiescence that can bearably be conceptualized as a simulacrum of death, they neither need nor can confer on themselves the kind of retrospective significance attained by analogy with the pleasure principle.”\(^{99}\) Indeed, childbirth as a model of plot is a direct contrast to the conception of sex as a model of plot: rather than ending with a “simulacrum of death,” the end of plot as conceptualized around birth is “quite literally, beginning itself.”\(^{100}\) This model of plot corresponds felicitously with Honigmann’s texts. Whereas in traditional conceptions of plot, the narrative ends swiftly after the climax with definitive closure, conceptualizing plot around childbirth leaves the narrative open-ended, suggesting creative and interpretive possibilities beyond the conclusion of the text, which dovetails with the lack of stable meaning and decisive endings in Honigmann’s works.

Once viewed through this lens of plot-as-childbirth, *Ein Kapitel aus meinem Leben* seems almost to have been written with this model in mind. Just before the end of the book, the narrator

---

99 Ibid.
100 Ibid.
mentions birth explicitly: “Meine Mutter hat mich geboren, als sie vierzig Jahre alt war, ich blieb ihr einziges Kind, und sie wäre nach der Geburt fast am Kindbettfieber gestorben.”\textsuperscript{101} Having only pages before discussed her mother’s death, it seems natural that the narrator would address her own birth, the origin point of their relationship. But then she continues, “Sie hat mich geboren, und nun setze ich sie wieder als Legende in die Welt.”\textsuperscript{102} Here the narrator turns her relationship with her mother on its head. Litzy Kohlmann may have given birth to a flesh and blood daughter some five decades previously, but with the writing of this book, the narrator gives birth to a textual version of her own mother. Despite Litzy’s death, the narrator gives her new life by quite literally inscribing her. Like the actual Litzy, the Litzy born in the act of writing \textit{Ein Kapitel} is complicated, dynamic, and devoid of stable answers. Winnett argues that narratological models of plot revolving around childbirth “force us to think forward rather than backward; whatever finality birth possesses as a physical experience pales in comparison with the exciting, frightening sense of the beginning of a new life.”\textsuperscript{103} Embedded in both the plot- and meta-levels of Honigmann’s works, is this exciting, frightening sense of a new life through text, a life, that while constant in its fixed representation on a page, dies and is reborn with every rereading or retelling.

\textsuperscript{101} Honigmann, \textit{Ein Kapitel aus meinem Leben} (2004), 138.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{103} Winnett, 509.
CHAPTER 3

The Emotion Chronicler of Our Family:
Memory, Storytelling, and Metanarration in Gila Lustiger’s *So sind wir*

The referent of the titular pronoun in Gila Lustiger’s 2005 self-styled *Familienroman, So sind wir*, is ambiguous. As Ariane Eichenberg explicates in her monograph on contemporary German-language family novels, while the title’s *wir* refers at its most obvious to the family Lustiger, it is employed by the narrator throughout the novel as a signifier for many other, sometimes intersecting and sometimes wholly disparate groups. “Doch unter dem familiären *Wir,*” writes Eichenberg, “existiert ein anderes *Wir,* das die Juden meint, die getötet werden sollten, zu denen der Vater gehört, aber nicht die Tochter, die 1963 geboren wurde.”¹ Here the narrator’s first-person pronoun refers somewhat contradictorily to a group that she herself is not strictly part of: Holocaust survivors. As Eichenberg indicates, however, such a use of *wir* in Lustiger’s writing represents her identification with the suffering and trauma of her father, Arno Lustiger, a survivor of Nazi concentration camps and death marches who went on to become a founding member of Frankfurt’s postwar Jewish community as well as a prominent historian.² While Lustiger’s *So sind wir* relates the life stories of many of her relatives, including her mother, her maternal grandparents, and various aunts and uncles, at its heart is the story of her father, his miraculous survival, and his relationship to the next *wir* group that Eichenberg identifies, that of the “Nachgeborenen.”³

³ Eichenberg, 167.
This categorical distinction between Holocaust survivors as one *wir* and their descendants as another—which this time decidedly does include Lustiger—is central to the emotional torque of the novel. For while recounted stories of her familial past constitute a large portion of *So sind wir*, the central conflict in Lustiger’s novel is the transmission of familial memory from one generation to the next. This task is relatively straightforward for the narrator’s mother and maternal grandmother, both of whom engage throughout the narrator’s childhood in ritualized oral storytelling, passing on accounts of emigrations from Eastern Europe to British Mandate Palestine, of participation in the Haganah, or of Israel’s declaration of statehood. For the narrator’s father, however, communicating his traumatic past proves much more difficult, resulting in a father-daughter relationship marked by silence and uncertainty. In contrast to the spoken and dialogic means through which her mother’s past is communicated, the narrator learns the story of her father’s past from a written account that she stumbles upon in a Parisian bookstore through sheer happenstance. But this troubled intergenerational communication is not one-sided; though her father struggles to verbalize his painful wartime experiences, his daughter faces obstacles of her own in articulating the social stigma she feels in Germany and in wider Europe as the daughter of a Holocaust survivor and as a Jew. This latter designation constitutes the final *wir* that Eichenberg observes in Lustiger’s novel: “das Wir des auserwählten Volkes.”

Encircling the narrator’s private-sphere, familial conflicts is the broader, public-sphere difficulty of identifying as a Jew in post-Holocaust Europe. From her schooldays in Germany to her childhood trips to Israel to present-day discussions with non-Jewish friends in Paris, Lustiger’s novel explores the tensions that exist between nationalities, languages, religions, and memory cultures.

---

4 Ibid.
These various *wir*-groups identified by Eichenberg demonstrate the complex tangle of social identities that Lustiger’s novel works to unravel, as Eichenberg herself explains: “So kann man schon an dieser kleine Betrachtung des Personalpronomens sehen, dass mit diesem Roman die Geschichte einer ganzen Generation, die Geschichte der Juden im 20. Jahrhundert und schließlich die Geschichte des ganzen jüdischen Volkes überhaupt am Beispiel der eigenen Familie erzählt werden soll.” But Eichenberg’s enumeration of the novel’s *wir* groups is only complete in terms of intradiegetic referents. When listing participant groups in the narrated events, the *wir* used by Lustiger’s narrator does indeed point at various times to the Lustiger family, to Holocaust survivors, to their descendants, and to Jews in general. But another *wir* appears in Lustiger’s narration as well, in reference to a group more sparsely populated than any of those aforementioned. This last *wir* is a group of two: the narrator and the extradiegetic reader. There are three different passages in which the narrator addresses the reader with this inclusive pronoun. The first precedes a short anecdotal aside: “Wollen wir einen verstohlen Blick auf eine Anekdote werfen…” The second is found in the middle of the narrator’s description of her young father’s rescue by American soldiers as he escaped a death march in World War II. The narrator provides a brief history lesson, detailing the positions of both Axis and Allied powers at the time, information that is necessary for the comprehension of her father’s predicament, but that, the narrator argues in the subsequent *wir*- and *uns*-ridden passage, should remain firmly in the background:

Aber was geht das uns an? Berührt es uns, dass Geprellte wieder einmal auf dem Altar der Weltpolitik und des strategischen Gleichgewichts geopfert werden? Können wir es nachempfinden? Spüren wir es auf der Haut? […] Ja, was geht uns das Abkommen von Jalta an und was die hosenscheißerische Furcht von Menschen, die in der Folge dieses Fatalen Irrtums ihr Gesicht und ihre Stimme verlieren? Jalta, das Abkommen von

---

5 Ibid., 167-68.
Potsdam—sie sind nicht mehr als Fußnoten in der Geschichte meines Vaters. Unsere Berufung ist es nur, ihm zu folgen. Und so schauen wir halt auf den jungen Mann, der in einem Jeep hocket und sich ordentlich durchrütteln lässt.7

The third and final instance of this *wir* occurs as the narrator recounts the initial meeting of her parents, some years after the end of the war, when her father has arrived in the young state of Israel. At the time, the narrator’s mother was a soldier in the Israeli army, prompting the narrator to contemplate the impression that seeing a Jew in the uniform of a Jewish military must have made on her Holocaust survivor father. Like the two previous examples, this *wir* is metaleptic in its disruption of the narrative world, but it is distinct in that it follows a set of instructions, similarly metaleptic in their address to the reader, but curiously using the impersonal pronoun *man* before shifting to the *wir* in question: “Um das nachzuvollziehen, schließe man für einen kurzen Moment die Augen, vergesse seinen Alltag und versetze sich in meinen Vater hinein. Sehen wir es jetzt? Spüren wir nun den unbezwingbaren Zauber?”8

Embedded in these three occurrences of the extradiegetic *wir* pronoun in Lustiger’s novel are the central themes of this chapter: Lustiger’s focus on the subjective, personal experiences of individuals over the purportedly objective, generalized events of history books and other such media (“was geht uns das Abkommen von Jalta an”9); the centrality of emotion to effective and affective storytelling as well as to comprehensive knowledge (“Können wir es nachempfinden? Spüren wir es auf der Haut?”10; “Spüren wir nun den unbezwingbaren Zauber?”11); and Lustiger’s uneasy relationship to the agency and control she has as the narrator of nonfictional events that she

7 Ibid., 170.
8 Ibid., 181.
9 Ibid., 170.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid., 181.
is reporting secondhand ("Wollen wir einen verstohlen Blick auf eine Anekdote werfen"\textsuperscript{12}; "Und so schauen wir halt auf den jungen Mann…"\textsuperscript{13}; “Sehen wir es jetzt?”\textsuperscript{14}). These topics appear throughout Lustiger’s book woven thematically into the stories and anecdotes she recounts. But her conceptions of them appear at the meta-level as well, in her frequent and unconventional employment of metanarration, which she uses to comment on the nature of narrating and storytelling and, in so doing, to build a relationship with the reader—something also evident in her use of the extradicgetic \textit{wir} pronoun. But this connection with the reader, built on empathy and emotion, is cultivated only in the first half of the novel, when the narrator examines and evaluates various methods of memory transmission, denouncing any method that instrumentalizes emotion or claims objective control over a narrative. In the second half of the novel, however, a narrative shift occurs, and the narrator uses her established relationship with the reader to direct their response to the text, ultimately employing the same narrative strategies she herself rejects.

\textit{i. Masculinity, Jewishness, and Silence: The First Memory Knot}

While Lustiger’s novel is designated as a \textit{Familienroman} and does indeed contain stories and anecdotes from her childhood and familial past, \textit{So sind wir} is as much a meditation on various forms of storytelling as it is the story of a family. Narrative accounts of events from the narrator’s life as well as from those of her parents and grandparents are strewn throughout the book, told neither chronologically nor arranged by setting, main character, or any other conventional factor. Rather, the first half of the book is organized around what Lustiger terms \textit{Erinnerungsknoten}—

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 128.  \\
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 170.  \\
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 181. 
\end{flushright}
various objects on which snarls of memories, thoughts, and emotions are tangled.\textsuperscript{15} Notably, these memory knots are less related to the content of the familial memories presented in Lustiger’s novel—the Holocaust, for instance, or the early days of the state of Israel—and much more heavily related to the various methods through which these stories are told. The four knots of the first half of \textit{So sind wir}—newspapers, bookshelves, a paperweight, and Palestine—all serve as proxies for means of historical and mnemonic transmission. The first memory knot, newspapers, is the most straightforward, followed by the second, bookshelves, which function metonymically as symbols of the books they are created to hold. A paperweight, the third knot, represents oral storytelling. Belonging to the narrator’s grandparents and shut up safely in their liquor cabinet in Jerusalem, the paperweight operated throughout the narrator’s childhood as a pretext for the recitation of the story of her grandparents’ immigration from Eastern Europe, where the paperweight originates, to British Mandate Palestine. In this portion of the novel, however, it becomes representative of oral storytelling in general, moving beyond the history of the paperweight itself to include other family memories recounted by the narrator’s grandparents as well as the childhood bedtime stories told by her mother about her early life in Israel. Lastly, the fourth and final knot—Palestine—comes to symbolize an eschewal of memory transmission, i.e., intergenerational forgetting.

As the narrator weaves various anecdotes from her life and her family’s lives around these four methods of mnemonic transmission—newspapers, books, oral storytelling, and forgetting—she simultaneously delves into the particular type of “Verteilung von Informationen” that each method enables, as well as “die Wirksamkeit der Erzähl muster,” as Sahra Dornick describes

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 9.
it in her article on Lustiger’s novel.\textsuperscript{16} Throughout the book, the narrator develops a hierarchy of these storytelling methods, privileging certain features that, in her schema, are critical for effective and principled storytelling: emotion, a focus on the individual, and an acknowledgment of the inherently subjective nature of all narrated events. It is tempting to organize this hierarchy into an easy dichotomy, with the narrator’s German father, his reticence, and his propensity for newspapers on one side, and the narrator’s Israeli mother, her loquacity, and her disposition toward oral storytelling on the other. Indeed, this is the model that Eichenberg proposes: “Gegenüber stehen sich Israel und Deutschland—Reden und Schweigen; Heldenerzählungen gegen Schweigen und Entwürdigung und Verlust des Menschseins; Mutter und Vater.”\textsuperscript{17} Yet the narrator provides other data points that disrupt these easy binaries, including her relationship to books, which falls on the spectrum somewhere between newspapers and oral storytelling, as well as her maternal grandfather’s near complete eschewal of the written or spoken word in favor of concrete action in the flesh-and-blood world.

The narrator’s description of newspapers advances one binary, however: that of gender. Frequently throughout the novel, the narrator explicitly identifies certain behaviors, impulses, and values as either feminine or masculine. Newspapers, with their rigid, ordered formats and aim of reporting unemotional, unbiased fact, fall firmly into the category of masculine, as the narrator explains, “…Zeitungen haben auch heute noch für mich das Aroma von Geheimnis und Männlichkeit.”\textsuperscript{18} Newspaper reading is so beloved a pastime for the narrator’s father that he identifies his favorite city in the world as Paris simply due to the tremendous variety of newspapers

\textsuperscript{16} Sahra Dornick, “‘Fußnoten zur Familie’: Zur Performativität des Traumas der Shoah in den deutschjüdischen Familienromanen ‘So sind wir’ (Gila Lustiger) und ‘Familienleben’ (Viola Roggenkamp),” \textit{Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte} 64, no. 2 (2012): 144.
\textsuperscript{17} Eichenberg, 168.
\textsuperscript{18} Lustiger, 14.
available there for purchase.\textsuperscript{19} Many scenes in the first part of the novel that depict her father with a newspaper in hand also allude to the masculinity the narrator sees enshrined in this activity, describing him as being “in seiner Männernelt” or as “ein absolutes Bild männlicher Hartnäckigkeit.”\textsuperscript{20} Recounting her mother’s amusement at her father’s habit of clipping out newspaper stories that he deems of heightened importance only to lose them or throw them away, the narrator states: “Und hier haben wir schon so ein mustergültiges Bild, das alles darstellt: den männlichen Wunsch, das verwirrende Leben zu ordnen und zu meistern, und die weibliche Passivität, die sich solch eine fieberhafte Aktivität nicht stören lässt.”\textsuperscript{21} But this masculine impulse towards order, control, and dispassionate factuality extends beyond a simple conception of one journalistic medium.

As the novel progresses, the narrator’s increasingly sharp critique of her father’s relationship to newspapers reveals itself to be a wider indictment of what Markus Neuschäfer identifies as “eine faktenorientierte und sachbezogene Form der Erinnerung.”\textsuperscript{22} The second section of So sind wir, organized not around the array of memory knots found in the first half, but rather around a single conversation held between the author-cum-narrator-cum-protagonist with her French friend Dominique at a cocktail party, presents narration that is both more direct and more caustic, allowing the narrator’s condemnatory stance to rise to the surface. Reuniting the notions of masculinity and fact-based, emotionless reportage, the narrator describes her father as a man “mit seinem feuchten Schwamm aus Fakten, enzyklopädischem Wissen, grundlegenden Prinzipien, mit unerschütterlichen Richtlinien […] und seiner gesunden männlichen Abscheu vor

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 21.
\item \textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 13; Ibid., 10.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 11.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Markus Neuschäfer, Das bedingte Selbst: Familie, Identität und Geschichte im zeitgenössischen Generationenroman (Berlin: epubli GmbH, 2013), 327.
\end{itemize}
femininer Gefühlslustigei."23 Shrouded in sarcasm and acerbity, this statement could potentially be read as a denunciation of women and their supposed propensity for melodrama, but a passage from the end of the novel makes evident that the narrator’s allegiances are firmly on the side of emotion. Leaving all pretense aside, the narrator states, “dass Fakten nichts sind und historisches Wissen nichts. Dass Daten nichts sind und Tatsachen ein Blendwerk, weil man der Geschichte meiner Familie nicht beikommen kann, wenn man sich nicht dem Zufall ausliefert. Dem Zufall? Ja. Und den Gefühlen, Geräuschen, Eindrücken, Begegnungen und Sehnsüchten.”24 Here we have the narrator’s argument regarding facts and emotions at its most distilled: when it comes to traumatic and burdensome history, facts alone are not enough. Just as necessary, if not more so, is what writer and Holocaust survivor Charlotte Delbo terms “deep memory.” Standing in contrast to “‘ordinary’ intellectual memory, the memory connected to the thinking processes”—memory concerned with fact and accuracy—deep memory “preserves sensations, physical imprints,” and “the memory of the senses.”25 Rather than the historical knowledge and information her father so readily consumes, the narrator prizes those emotions, sensations, and impressions that logical positivism casts aside as subjective, biased, unverifiable, and therefore untrue.

It is for this reason that the narrator criticizes the “rationale[] Haltung ihres Vaters” and diagnoses his “Zeitungslektüre […] als Flucht.”26 Newspapers, the narrator argues, absolve readers of the burden of emotion: “Die Zeitung […] zertrampelt Tag für Tag das Gefühl mit ihrer zurückhaltenden, kaltblütigen Ausgeglichenheit […]Sie] ist hoffnungslos falsch, denn die rettet

---

23 Lustiger, 163-64.
24 Ibid., 252.
26 Neuschäfer, 329.
eine übersättigte, zeitungslavendene Gesellschaft vor schneidendem Schmerz.”

In their transformation of the “unheilvolle, furchtbare, dumme” world into a manageable entity that is “übersichtlich und ordentlich in Spalten gezwängt,” newspapers present a reality that while coherent, impartial, and manageable, is also, in the cosmology of Lustiger’s novel, demonstrably false. From their painful pasts, the narrator and her family know all too well the chaos, injustice, and illogic that govern human endeavor. The journalistic aim of presenting a reality made fair and balanced through the elision of subjective emotions and passions becomes, then, a flight from reality as it actually exists, something the narrator makes plain in her characterizations of newspapers as “Märchen,” or as possessing “quasi mythischen Proportionen,” referencing two genres characterized by their reliance on fantasy over realism. Her father’s tendency to escape into the hyper-rational world of journalism is likewise portrayed as irrational when the narrator describes him being enticed by headlines and their employment of “die Kunst des Verführens.”

Befitting its designation as a Familienroman, Lustiger’s novel does not explicitly delve into the wider societal implications of this memory paradigm signified by newspapers, but keeps her analysis at the level of kin, providing both cause and consequence for her father’s obsession with fact and evasion of feeling. “1939 hatte mein fünfzehnjähriger Vater noch keine Zeitung gelesen,” explains the narrator, “sondern sich nach assimiliertem, aufgeklärter jüdischer Tradition in irgendeinen Griechen verbissen.” This is the point in the novel in which the narrator first

---

27 Lustiger, 22.
28 Ibid., 21.; Notably, the only part of a newspaper that Lustiger esteems is the obituaries, which she praises precisely because of emotional inclinations: “Sie bilden den menschlichen Höhepunkt jeder Zeitung. Die Todesanzeigen sind Schmerz, Drama, Intrige in Rohformat,” Lustiger 15.
29 Ibid., 10.
30 Ibid., 16.
31 Ibid., 22.
reveals her father’s backstory and, notably, she frames it around both his relationship to newspapers and his Jewish heritage. Here, though, the two bear an oppositional relationship to one another: he did not read newspapers because he is Jewish. The coupling of Jewishness with the phrase “irgendeinen Griechen” aids this opposition in its evocation of archaic texts whose modern import is at best abstract and necessitative of interpretation, in contrast to newspapers and their daily regenesis of concrete facts and figures immediately relevant to contemporary life. The narrator then proceeds to briefly describe her father’s World War II experiences in various ghettos and concentration camps, before logically reversing the relationship between Jewishness and newspapers: “Mein Vater hatte sich einmal von der Welt überrumpeln lassen, nun hielt er sich, Zeitungen in acht Sprachen lesend, informiert. Er hatte am eigenen Leib erfahren: Kein Jude kann der Welt entfliehen, und wenn er es versucht, dann bezahlt er seine Realitätsflucht mit dem Leben.”

Having been jarred out of his secure world of antiquated literature by the horrors of the Holocaust, the narrator’s father now turns to newspapers for the precise reason the narrator claims he previously avoided them: his Jewish identity. This shift in reading habits corresponds with a cultural shift in relation to memory and trauma. The rupture of the Holocaust forces the narrator’s father, along with other Holocaust survivors, especially those who remained in or returned to Germany, to reevaluate their relationship to the society in which they live. No longer do they inhabit the secure world of assimilation; rather, they have been made painfully and traumatically aware of their perceived difference and the precarity of an untroubled existence. In his efforts to avoid allowing an atrocity like the Holocaust to reoccur, the narrator’s father strives to keep himself “informiert” and therefore protected by his newspaper reading.

---

32 Ibid., 23.
This informational hypervigilance is only one aspect of the narrator’s father’s response to the trauma of the Holocaust, though, given the evasion of emotion and corresponding avoidance of the more painful and trying aspects of reality that the narrator imputes to the journalistic genre and her father’s postwar reading habits. In addition to his wish to remain informed and therefore protect himself and his family from any potential future atrocities, the narrator’s father also uses newspapers and the dispassionate, factual, and ordered worldview they promote to refrain from coping with his traumatic memories. Viewed in this light, the narrator’s assertion that a Jew trying to escape from the world inevitably “bezahlt […] seine Realitätsflucht mit dem Leben” applies to her father after having survived the war as much as it did to him before; it is merely that the form of Realitätsflucht has changed.\textsuperscript{33} Rather than fleeing from reality through the fantasy of fiction, her father now does so through the fantasy of a simpler world purged of all difficult emotion. And while this form of Realitätsflucht does not result in her father’s death, the narrator makes plain that he paid for it with his life in another way: through his (in)ability to connect and communicate with his family. The many scenes dotting the first half of So sind wir that feature the narrator’s father silently reading newspapers also contain a young Gila, observing him and attempting to refocus her father’s keen and unyielding attention away from the broadsheets in his hand and onto his two small daughters. The narrator describes waking up at night and creeping out of her bedroom to spy on her father sitting by his reading lamp or inching ever so slowly and persistently across the sofa until she had finally neared her father, who sat reading, enough to nestle her minute form into his side.\textsuperscript{34}

\begin{flushright}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{34} Ibid. 13.; Ibid., 17.
\end{itemize}
\end{flushright}
As a literal activity, his newspaper reading leaves the narrator’s father with little time and attention to devote to his children, seen in the narration through the eyes of the narrator’s childhood self: “Mein Vater ist vertieft in Zeitung. Überfliegt Schlagzeilen. Liest Weltpolitik, Innenpolitik, Außenpolitik und hat kein Auge für die Liebespolitik seines Kindes.”35 As a metaphorical device, the small act of newspaper reading becomes an assessment of her father’s parenting on a larger scale. Use of the neologism “Liebespolitik” in contrast to drier, established fields like domestic and foreign politics points again to the blunted affective capabilities of her father, while references to “die Abwesenheit meines lesenden Vaters” as well as descriptions of his “schweigsames Mienenspiel” indicate the gulf that this unemotional comportment creates between the generations.36 In the words of Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, the “main function” of memory “is not to inform factually but to transmit affectively.”37 The narrator’s father’s inability to engage emotionally with his children indicates a disruption of intergenerational cultural and mnemonic transmission. This theme is captured as well when the narrator discusses her father’s propensity towards silence. Referring to the information and knowledge concealed inside a newspaper’s folds, the narrator states, “Mein Vater schluckte haufenweise Geheimnisse und spuckte keines aus.”38 Later in the novel, the narrator is more explicit about the secretiveness and silence of her father, declaring, “Wir waren und sind eine Familie, die schonend über die Vergangenheit schweigt.”39

35 Ibid., 18.
36 Ibid., 17; Ibid., 14.; At one point, Lustiger expresses that it actually only through the realm of her father’s newspaper habits that she was ever able to successfully enter her father’s world: “Alle Geschichte, die über mich geschrieben worden sind, hat mein Vater gelesen, ausgerissen und verloren. Dass er sie verloren hat, freut mich fast mehr, als dass er sie gelesen hat. Denn so bin auch ich Teil des gewaltigen, unauffindbaren Archivs geworden…” Lustiger 23.
38 Ibid., 16.
39 Ibid., 68.
This silence stems, as the word “schonend” indicates, in part from a desire to protect his children from the horrors of his past, but the issue is thornier than this simple explanation. Agnes Mueller identifies a more subconscious source of the narrator’s father’s reticence and emotional distance: “it was also the terrifying dimension of the experiences of the Holocaust that silenced her father, and that made it impossible to speak.”40 In this reading, her father’s silence is not entirely the calculated choice the narrator frames it as—“Mein Vater hat uns immer vor sich selbst beschützen wollen”—but also a suppressed emotional response to trauma.41

In contrast to Mueller’s interpretation, however, the narrator depicts her father’s silence as willful and deliberate, not the involuntary coping mechanism that scholars of memory and trauma might expect. But while the narrator resists this framing of her father’s reticence as an unconscious byproduct of his painful experiences in the Holocaust, she does attribute it to one source located outside the bounds of his own will: Judaism. In the narrator’s telling, silence, absence, and concealment are not a newly emerged malignant growth, caused by the cancer of the Holocaust, but rather the original body of Judaism itself: “Das, was man den jüdischen Haarspaltereien nennt, diese unsere vertrackte Logik, Kabbala, Massora, Halacha, trallala, nichts anderes als eine über Jahrhunderte am Schweigen und Verschweigen geübte Hinterfragung der Wirklichkeit. Urgroßvater, Großmutter, Vater, Töchter, Enkel, Urenkelinnen—seit Generationen geben wir uns damit ab […] und unsere Wirklichkeit ist ein abgewetztes Kopfsteinpflaster, mit den Jahren verschlissen und blank gerieben.”42 In this interpretation, the gaps in the narrator’s knowledge about her father’s past become an indelible feature of Judaism itself, extending far beyond their

41 Lustiger, 68.
42 Ibid., 162-63.
temporal or geographical specificity. The genealogical lineage presented here by the narrator reinforces this disassociation from the particularities of the Holocaust, spanning as it does six generations, well beyond the three or four that can be said to have been affected by the event since its occurrence, through either lived experience or postmemory. Cutting across time, gender, and number, this lineage indicates the narrator’s understanding that the silence and suppression experienced in her relationship with her father exists at the interstices of all generations of Jews, washing away the memory, knowledge, and experience of one generation in such a way that the next inherits not a blank slate, but a palimpsest, in which the past is muddled with the present—visible, yet illegible. Marianne Hirsch’s conception of postmemory is here expanded from its original conception of the inheritance of trauma from one generation to the next and becomes an inescapable phenomenon affecting each generation, regardless of historical circumstance.43

This ascription of silence, secrets, and rupture to Judaism itself also mirrors the narrator’s description of her father’s contrasting pre- and postwar reading habits, in which his (dis)inclination to newspaper consumption is influenced by his changing conception of and relation to Jewish identity. In both cases, the narrator attributes behavior that might easily be viewed as specific to the events of the Second World War—memory schemas informed by trauma and intergenerational silences—not to historical contingencies, but to Jewish culture in toto. While it might seem that the narrator is implicitly creating a model of Jewish relationship to memory and postmemory, the other memory knots that the narrator subsequently explores in the course of the book complicate this, as these “Jewish” characteristics of her father’s relationship to memory—emotionlessness, impersonality, individualism, and silence—are contrasted with the comportment of other Jewish

characters, including the narrator’s mother and maternal grandparents. The chief difference between these two juxtaposed groups is indeed not a matter of religion or ethnicity at all, but of geography, for while the narrator’s father and his relationship to memory metonymically embodied in newspapers hail from Europe, the figures positioned on the other side of the narrator’s memory spectrum are all Israeli. Her father’s relationship to memory, then, is not only coded as masculine, but also as diasporic.

**ii. Femininity, Israel, and Communication: The Second Memory Knot**

Focalizing through the perspective of her childhood self, the narrator presents her father’s silence and restraint as unabashedly masculine: “Ich blickte stolz zum Vater hoch, der gewaltig und einsam auf dem Sofa thronte, und dachte: Man braucht schon den Hunger eines großes Mannes, ja die Konstitution eines Riesen, um so eine gefährliche, von Geheimnissen und Intrigen wimmelnde, stetig wachsende Welt im Maul zu behalten.” If one side of the gender binary drawn and repeatedly upheld by the narrator aligns masculinity, reticence, and hunger, the other side features femininity, candor, and the typically female-coded act of nourishing the hunger of the others. Indeed, in contrast to her father’s solitary and still absorption in the impossibly ordered, falsely emotionless world of newspapers from which the protagonist remains forever excluded, her mother’s handling of memory manifests itself in nightly bursts of oral storytelling in which, as the narratee, the protagonist is necessarily involved. Indeed, Aleida Assmann highlights the inclusive nature of this sort of “conversational remembering” in her description of it as “informelle[] wechselseitige[] Kommunikation” through which “Vergangenheit nicht nur

44 Ibid., 16.
The stories recited in the twilit childhood bedroom the narrator shared with her younger sister run the gamut of topics from her communist grandfather to her aunt’s maritime voyage across the Mediterranean to a goldfish-filled aquarium with a false bottom, but they tend to coalesce around one theme: Israel. Simply uttering the country’s name, the narrator states, was enough to persuade her mother to delay their bedtime by a few minutes: “Mit einem Ruck setzte ich mich auf: ‘Israel.’ Meine Mutter beugte sich über mich, küsste mich auf die Stirn und seufzte, und ich wusste, ich hatte sie überrumpelt. Sie würde erzählen, fast fügsam, obwohl man einem Kind nicht einfach gehorchen darf. Drei, vier Minuten würde sie von ihrer Kindheit schwärmen.” When not rhapsodizing about her Israeli childhood, her mother tells of the emigrations of her parents and extended family members to British Mandate Palestine and to Israel, of the conflict between the Haganah and the Irgun, and of the founding of the Jewish state. Just as newspapers become symbolic of her father’s evolving relationship to Judaism in the Diaspora, so too is the oral storytelling of the narrator’s sabra mother bound inextricably to her own Jewish identity, which is to say, to Israel.

Strengthening this connection between oral storytelling, femininity, and Israeli identity is the other prominent raconteuse of So sind wir: the narrator’s maternal grandmother. Originally from Poland, the narrator’s grandmother met and married her husband in their native land before emigrating to British Mandate Palestine in 1924, years prior to both the Second World War and formation of the state of Israel. Of the few possessions they were able to bring with them, even fewer survived into the time of the narrator’s childhood: a few blurry photographs and a glass paperweight. The narrator acknowledges that the paperweight itself bore no particular distinction

46 Ibid., 222.
that would merit transport across continents: “Keiner weiß, warum gerade dieses Ding, und keiner hat sie je gefragt.”\(^{47}\) But the significance of the paperweight lies neither in its practical nor commercial value, both of which are manifestly negligible. Rather, the paperweight gains its meaning and status as the third memory knots of the novel due to its capacity to elicit storytelling, as the narrator explains, “Das Ding kann Geschichten erzählen. Man muss sie ihm nur entlocken.”\(^{48}\) Because of this tale-telling power, the monetarily valueless paperweight becomes invaluable, indicated by its safekeeping in the family’s liquor cabinet. Removed from economic circulation and carrying no “practical or usage value,” the paperweight is transfigured from a mere thing into a semiophore, an object that “bear[s] meaning” due to its ability to represent invisible or abstract entities.\(^{49}\) This semiophoric nature of the paperweight is evident in the narrator’s characterization of it as a “Reliquie” and as “ein modernes Totem.”\(^{50}\) In contrast to the newspapers that engender silence in her father, the paperweight gains its mystical aura from its ability to engender speech and communication, in the form of stories “einer Verlorenen Welt.”\(^{51}\)

This power of the paperweight, however, is not afforded to everyone. In order to draw out the stories contained in its crystalline depths, one must have experienced the events of these stories firsthand: “Könnte ich ihn mit den Augen meiner Großmutter sehen, würde er mir nun von Polen berichten, von der Rude im Schtetl, sobald der Sabbat beginnt, von Wasserträgern, Wunderrabbis, Schnorren und Bundisten […] mais il n’y a rien à faire, der Briefbeschwerer bleibt stumm, mir fehlt die Erinnerung, die ihn gesprächig macht.”\(^{52}\) Herein lies another contrast between the

\(^{47}\) Ibid., 81.  
\(^{48}\) Ibid., 101.  
\(^{50}\) Lustiger, 81, 101.  
\(^{51}\) Ibid., 81.  
\(^{52}\) Ibid.
memory paradigm signified by newspapers and that signified by the paperweight: objectivity versus subjectivity. Central to the narrator’s criticism of the world in which her father lives, the world fashioned out of newspapers and their fact-based reportage, is the notion of journalism as impartial and objective. Oral storytelling as conceived by the narrator and as metonymically embodied by the paperweight, is necessarily subjective, as it calls upon the individual perspective of the storyteller—one must have the relevant life experience and the correct memories in order to render the paperweight “gesprächig.”

This prizing of the personal point of view that oral storytelling allows for, if not demands, is evident in an anecdote recounted by the narrator in the second half of the book, when she finds herself in conversation with her friend Dominique at a cocktail party. Dominique repeatedly and increasingly belligerently implores the narrator to tell of Israel’s Staatsgründung, a tale the narrator heard many times as a child, as it belonged to the cache of Israel-themed bedtime stories recited by her mother. When the narrator finally recounts the story after much badgering, Dominique is disappointed. The formation of the state of Israel is ripe for drama, action, even sentimentality, and the narrator’s mother, somewhere in late childhood at the time, was there on the frontlines, sitting on her father’s shoulders on Rothschild Boulevard in Tel Aviv as they signed the Israeli Declaration of Independence in an art museum located on that street. But because the story has always been recounted from the perspective of her mother, the central feature is a doll from Europe that her mother had been allowed to bring with her that day. Dominique denounces the doll as a “durch und durch unerhebliche Detail” and accuses the narrator of presenting her with a “Teilwahrheit,” considering the narrator’s mother’s story, though replete in dramatic potential, does not extend much past the memory of sitting on her father’s shoulders in the crowd and playing
with the doll. The narrator maintains that the story she recounted is indeed the truth, before elaborating: “Und ich sagte ihr, dass meine Mutter Zeitzeuge gewesen sei und dass ich keine Lust hätte, meine nimmermüde Phantasie dazu zu benutzen, jetzt ein rührendes Bild zu produzieren von einer Staatsgründung, die meine Mutter, Hauptperson in dieser Szene, nicht im Geringsten interessiert hat.”

Paramount to Lustiger in this anecdote is not the quality of the story or its narrativity, but rather the fact that it remains truthful and accurate to the subjective perspective from which it is told. “Sie sei dabei gewesen,” Lustiger writes, “und keiner dürfe ihr im Namen einer höheren Wahrheit das Recht absprechen, die ganze Angelegenheit mit ihrer Sicht um eine erhebliche Dimension zu erweitern.” Between the word Recht and the modal verb dürfen, the narrator makes it plain that, in her view, stories derived from memory do not exist in the aether, there for the taking and telling of anyone who wishes. Rather, there is an element of authority, of permission and prerogative, to them, with those who experienced the events of the story firsthand—in this case, the narrator’s mother—having the ultimate right to this tale. Those who have come by it through secondhand postmemory—the narrator, as she retells it to both Dominique and the book’s readers—may pass it on, but only if the story remains framed in the Sicht of its originator. In this Lustigerian conception, Bettina Spoerri notes, memories “werden als unterschiedliche Versionen der Vergangenheit begriffen, die an den Standort des Erzählenden und den Zeitpunkt, in dem er erzählt, gebunden sind.” In contrast to the high esteem her father, a historian by trade, holds for impersonal information and fact—a generic aim perceived by the narrator as unattainable and

53 Ibid., 228.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid., 229.
innately false—the narrator emphasizes the personal, privileging memory over history and expressly foregrounding individual perspective, rather than attempting to mask it behind the veneer of objectivity.

Adding to the distinction the narrator draws between her conception of newspapers and that of oral storytelling is the divergent relationship of these genres to order and chaos. Whereas newspapers aim to present a world that is “übersichtlich und ordentlich in Spalten gezwängt,” oral storytelling, due to its extemporaneous quality, embraces the entropic nature of our lives, defying impulses to fit events and experiences into neat, well-structured molds.57 Indeed, the narrator compares the act of narrating personal experience to riding a willful horse: “Glatt kann nicht erzählt werden, wenn man sich auf seine Erinnerung stützt. Das Gedächtnis liebt Anekdoten, scheut plötzlich auf wie ein kleiner Gaul, schlägt einen Wildpfad ein, so dass der Erzähler Mühe hat, die Zügel in der Hand zu behalten.”58 Here memory and narration operate in opposition to one another. Memory is wild and meandering, with the rigid order of narration attempting to tame it.

Even when subjected to this regulatory impulse of narrative structure, however, the ferality of memory still peeks through. The narrator describes the muddled nature of her mother’s account of the founding of the state of Israel: “Die Staatsgründung war kein einheitlicher Text, sondern ein verworrender Haufen, unordentlich, immer neu kombiniert, vermischt mit Liedern, Anekdoten, Einfällen und Lücken; den Takt gab die Hand der Mutter an.”59 But this chaos and disorder is not to be viewed negatively; shortly after stating that as a storyteller her mother “brachte alles

57 Lustiger, 21.
58 Ibid., 76-77.
59 Ibid., 114.
durcheinander, wenn sie den Mund aufmachte,” the narrator comments, “Das war (berauschend und erschreckend zugleich) die erste sinnliche Wahrnehmung von Freiheit.”

Throughout the novel, oral storytelling is associated repeatedly with freedom and joy, embedded in words such as “schwärmern” and in the sensory-laden “angenehmen Schauer” and “süßes Parfüm” that the narrator remembers herself experiencing as she listened to her mother each night. In the most pronounced example, the narrator states explicitly, “Glücklich habe ich meine Mutter nur gesehen, wenn sie von ihrer Kindheit erzählte. Rather than the barren dispassion of her father’s newspapers, the stories told by the narrator’s mother and grandmother evoke strong emotions and sensations, bringing happiness and release to narrator and narratee alike, and demonstrating Hirsch’s claim that memory, first and foremost, “signals an affective link to the past.” Yet the emotional range elicited by oral storytelling in Lustiger’s novel does not extend far beyond these positive feelings; other emotions that one might expect to encounter in tales so rife with war, upheaval, and loss—anger, sadness, frustration, grief, or fear—are notably absent from both the stories’ content and their recitation. Moreover, the narrator makes plain that such emotions remained unacknowledged and unexamined by her mother’s family, writing of “einem unantastbaren, wenn auch nie ausgesprochenen Gebot, das zu übertreten keiner von uns gewagt hätte: Du sollst nicht über Gefühle sprechen, […] die ein glückliches, friedvolles Leben sabotieren. Denn ein glückliches, friedvolles Leben war und bleibt unser gemeinsames Familienprojekt.”

---

60 Ibid., 223.
61 Ibid., 222, 114-15.
62 Ibid., 114.
63 Hirsch, 33.
64 Ibid., 83.
grandmother are recited not simply for their entertainment value or their capacity to convey familial history. There is also a didactic quality to them, reflecting the tendency Aleida Assmann identifies in the memory cultures of trauma victims towards “die Verschweigung der Leiden um einer lebensbejahenden Perspektive, um des eigenen Überlebens und der Kinder willen.”\textsuperscript{65} This evocation of positive emotions that the narrator attributes to oral storytelling is therefore intentional.

Whereas the stories told by the narrator’s mother center primarily on Israel, those told by her grandmother often take place in Europe, reporting on either her own experiences before immigrating to Mandatory Palestine or those of other European Jews during the Holocaust. These tales, the narrator intimates, are told with a specific aim in mind: to further the communal family project of happiness. The narrator lists the myriad of stories she received as a child:


As the causal conjunction \textit{darum} makes plain, the telling of these stories has a direct effect on the narrator and her fellow family members, namely the suppression of negative emotions and the idealization of positive ones. This is reinforced by the word \textit{schuldig} in the next sentence, which indicates that these stories inspired a sense of indebtedness—if not guilt—in their recipients. But, as evidenced by the expansive list of names and the subsequent pronouncement of these figures as \textit{Väter und Mütter}, this sense of obligation extends far beyond the bounds of the biological family.

\textsuperscript{65} Assmann, 99.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 83.
At issue here is not the specific histories of the narrator’s family members, but the Jewish people as a whole. The telling of these stories, then, cultivates not only a feeling of indebtedness to one’s predecessors, but also a notion of belonging to the wider Jewish community.

The desire to foster Jewish identity and belonging in the narrator and her sister similarly motivated their mother’s nighttime storytelling routine. As the narrator explains, she felt a certain ambivalence toward her mother as a child, thinking that perhaps her mother hated her two daughters for binding her to Germany, a country “mit dem sie nichts zu tun haben wollte.” As an adult, however, the narrator realizes that the situation is more nuanced: “Die Mutter ist nur an uns verzweifelt, weil wir deutsche Kinder waren. Die Mutter hasste uns nicht, sondern hasste alles Deutsche an uns. Ein Leben lang hat meine Mutter versucht, uns Kindern das Deutschtum auszutreiben, das man uns in der Schule und auf der Straße eingetrieben hatte.” That the stories told by the narrator’s mother all center on Israel, then, is no accident, as this theme works to instill in her children a sense of Israeli Jewish identity and, in so doing, to de-Germanize them. The narrator drives further at these indoctrinatory aims in her description of her mother sitting in the children’s bedroom each night: “Da saß sie, Abend für Abend, lockend, verführerisch, mit ihren dick aufgetragenen Kosmogonien und ihrem Propagandabeutelchen voller Glitzerstaub, wie ein agent provocateur und erhellte den Raum mit ihren Geschichten.” Both the phrase Propagandabeutelchen and the comparison of her mother to a spy acknowledge the cultural inculcation these stories are aimed at advancing.

Elsewhere, the narrator employs a softer metaphor to depict the intentionality she reads as behind storytelling, likening her mother’s stories to an antidote meant to cure her daughters of their

---

67 Ibid., 117.
68 Ibid.
69 Ibid., 223.
In this analogy, her mother’s bedtime stories are classed alongside elements associated with health and convalescence, but also aligned with the natural world: light, air, sun, and movement. Styled as *Wortkräuter*, these healing stories, too, become a part of nature, rendering their existence a standard, even necessary part of one’s environment. Curiously, the phrasing used to compare the *Staatsgründung* story to medicine appears another time in Lustiger’s novel, only a few pages prior, with nearly the exact same construction: “Die Staatsgründung kam auf Hebräisch daher und war ein fremd klingender süßer Brei, mit dem meine Mutter uns voll stopfte. Wir Kinder lauschten und fraßen Wörter.” In this instance, the reference to medicine is absent; the story is not told as the remedy to some illness or deficiency, but simply as nourishment. No longer are words curative *Kräuter*, but food that the children devour ravenously.

A similar metaphor, relating oral storytelling to sustenance, occurs far later in the novel, when the narrator addresses in depth the political aspects of the founding of the state of Israel for the first time. After explaining that as a child she had no concept of the contentious history of Israel and Palestine, she laments that these stories could have been told to her, as the ingredients—i.e. the knowledge and experiences of her grandmother—existed throughout her childhood. In the subjunctive, she imagines how this region’s complicated history could have been explained to her:

Ja, Stoff war vorhanden. Und es wäre auch eine da gewesen, die die Geschichte hätte ausrollen, anheben und drehen können wie einen hausgemachten Strudelteig. Mit flachen Händen hätte sie unter die Ereignisse gefasst und sie rundherum gedehnt und gezogen. Und wie Essäpfel hätte sie die Fakten geschält, entkernt und zerkleinert. Dann hätte sie Anekdoten wie Mandelblättchen gestreut und sie mit Schwächen so weich wie Butter, mit...

---

70 Ibid., 117.
71 Ibid., 114.
As in the previous analogy, storytelling is depicted here as food preparation. In complement to the conception of listening to a story as eating or consuming, the narrator presents the telling of a story as akin to baking or producing. Notably, the two food items chosen to symbolize both sides of the storytelling process—süßer Brei and apple strudel—are both sweet and pleasing, evoking connotations of comfort and warmth. These tranquil metaphors, likening storytelling to nourishment and remedies, function differently than the accusatory comparison of her mother to an agent provocateur equipped with a Propagandabeutelchen, with the disparity resulting in a certain tension in the narrator’s portrayal of oral storytelling, rendering it organic, yet artificial, wholesome, yet underhanded. Never resolved or even explicitly addressed at any point in the novel, the tension can be read as indicative of the narrator’s ambivalence towards oral storytelling as a vessel for the transmission of memory. Unlike her father’s newspapers, storytelling has the capacity to provide comfort and warmth—even happiness, in the case of her mother—but due to its dogmatic and didactic propensity, the genre can be just as manipulative as journalism.

iii. The Last Two Memory Knots: Disrupting the Binary

Between the first two memory knots and the narrative models of memory transmission they symbolize, the following dichotomies seem to emerge:

72 Ibid., 234.
But the final of the novel’s four memory knots, Palestine, the knot of forgetting, disrupts the last binary pair, for while the narrator’s Israeli mother and grandmother are both eager storytellers, her maternal grandfather—also an Israeli—has no fondness for narrative, whether written or spoken, journalistic or anecdotal, unemotional or impassioned. After stating that it is difficult to write about her grandfather, the narrator lists a number of poetic, yet fictional details she could ascribe to his life, before concluding, “Ja, man könnte einen ganzen Haufen Naturromantik anschleppen, um über die Landschaft seiner Jugend zu berichten, aber es wäre gelogen. Ich habe diese Landschaft nie gesehen. Weder mit eigenen Augen noch durch seinen Mund. Mein Großvater erzählte nichts.” But it is not merely oral storytelling that he eschews, as the narrator makes plain later: “Großvater, Pionier, Proletarier, Ketzer, Kommunist—hat weder Zeit für die wiedergespiegelte Welt der Bücher noch für heroische Geschichten.” In listing these various identities of her grandfather, the narrator sets them in opposition to the latter half of the sentence, rendering pioneer, proletarian, heretic, and communist all antithetical to books and stories. Indeed, while the argument could easily be made that these four identities require narrative and philosophy as much as any other, her grandfather conceives of them less in terms of the theory behind them and more in terms

---

73 Ibid., 104.
74 Ibid., 235.
of the actions required to live them. His is a world not of narrative escape, but of practicality, physicality, and function.

In his abstention from oral storytelling—so routine a habit in the lives of his wife and daughter—the narrator’s grandfather defies the binary that aligns silence with the Diaspora and speech with Israel. He further disrupts this binary, however, with his active association of narrative, writing, literature, and storytelling with diasporic Jewish culture. Describing his feelings towards Europe, the narrator states: “‘Galutnik’, würde er jetzt denken, wenn er wüsste, dass ich auf Deutsch über ihn schreibe.”75 His imagined pronouncement of the narrator as a Galutnik—the Yiddish word for a Jew living in the Diaspora—is doubly resonant, in that it refers not only to the narrator’s decision to write in the European tongue of German rather than Hebrew, but also simply to her decision to write. Her grandfather, she explains, had little interest in the European Jewish tradition of the intellectual and the textual, of discourse and discussion. Instead, he desired a life of physical work and of action: “Zwei Drittel der Menschheit wühlt in der Erde und hängt von den elementaren Naturgewalten ab, nur der Jude hockt im Cafèhaus und diskutiert […] doch mein Großvater sehnte sich nach Schinderei: Sümpfe trockenlegen, Kanäle graben, Land bebauen.”76 As is indicated by its sarcastic tone, this is not simply a longing to perform manual labor. It is circumscribed by the context of early twentieth-century Zionism. The narrator’s grandfather has no desire to drain the swamps and cultivate the land of Europe; there is a specific end goal attached to his yearnings, namely a Jewish revolution that culminates in the founding of a Jewish state. “Denn was ist eine jüdische Revolution?” the narrator asks before providing the answer: “Das ist: mit der äußerst stumpfsinnigen Arbeit des Pflügens die rein intellektuelle Lebensform des Juden

---

75 Ibid., 110.
76 Ibid., 112.
überwinden. Was ist jüdische Revolution? Aus einem im Denken verwurzelten Juden einen Bauern machen.”

The creation of a Jewish homeland could only occur, in the eyes of the narrator’s grandfather, with a renunciation not only of the low societal position afforded to most Jews in Europe, where they represented “den Letzten unter den Menschen,” but also of any cultural side effects their societal position had produced, including a predisposition to flee into the abstract world of thought and text.

The narrator attributes these Zionist aims not only to her grandfather, but to wider Israeli society as well. Whereas her grandmother and mother employed stories from Jewish history, both personal and collective, as a means of instilling Jewish identity and belonging in their half-German (grand)daughters, the narrator asserts that Israeli society more generally would prefer to forget “dass Israel von Überlebenden und nicht nur von Zionisten und Ideologen und ihrem politischen Determinismus geschaffen worden ist.” This privileging of Zionist mission over mnemonic transmission, of living over telling, requires a concomitant privileging of identities that uphold this hierarchy and a burial of anything that calls it into question. Active Zionists and ideologues built Israel; passive European Jews, content with their dismal lot in life, have nothing to do with it. This culturally enforced forgetting, however, is not endorsed by the narrator. Though she finds remembering difficult and even destructive (“Erinnerung [ist] eine Krankheit” she declares mere pages after inventing the term “Erinnerungsgiftstoff”), forgetting is judged even more harshly.

Memory might be a sickness, but the social and political consequence “dieses Vergessens ist fatal.” She explains this statement further: “Sie macht aus jedem Israeli einen, der sich seiner

---

77 Ibid.
78 Ibid., 109.
79 Ibid., 129.
80 Ibid., 7, 15.
81 Ibid., 129.
Väter und Mütter schämt. Sie macht aus jedem Israeli einen, der es sich und den anderen andauernd beweisen muss. Tagtäglich beweisen sich Israelis, dass sie keine Opfer sind."82 Throughout the novel, the narrator tends to sidestep criticisms of the state of Israel, choosing to focus on her own personal connection to the country instead of wider political issues within this larger context. This meditation on Israeli society constitutes the novel’s deepest and most condemnatory critique of the Jewish state and it is significant that it is framed around the relationship borne by the country to memory and forgetting, mirroring the relationship borne by her grandfather to living and telling.

While the narrator’s grandfather breaks the binary established by her parents and grandmother that aligns speech with Israel and silence with the Diaspora, his unwillingness to engage in narrative and storytelling of any kind does uphold the gender binary drawn by the narrator. His hyperfocus on real-world action is, after all, just another form of silence, thereby maintaining the dualism that reads silence as masculine and communication as feminine. Only one memory knot in the novel works to defy the gender binary: books. Like the other memory knots, this abstract method of memory transmission is symbolized by something concrete. In this instance, it is the bookcase that stood in the narrator’s childhood apartment in Frankfurt, which boasted numerous volumes of literature both classic and modern on its lower shelves and a collection of tomes on taboo topics—notably, the Holocaust and erotica—at the very top. The books held by this bookcase, including those illicit ones, belonged to her father, who, like the narrator, is both an avid consumer and devoted producer of books. Through this association with both the narrator and her father, books are coded as neither specifically masculine nor feminine; rather, they exist somewhere in the middle, rendering the gender binary into a spectrum. This is not only true for gender, however. Books, as portrayed by the narrator in her role as both reader

82 Ibid.
and writer, complicate many of the dichotomies that seem to emerge between newspapers and oral storytelling in the first two chapters of the book.

Newspapers are presented in *So sind wir* as promoting silence in her father, while the oral storytelling of her mother and grandmother naturally involves speech. Books, with their pages of unspoken language, present a hybrid of the two that is at once communicative, yet unvoiced, expressive, yet reserved. Recounting one afternoon from her childhood spent reading a book of erotica she had sneaked off the bookshelf’s highest ledge, the narrator depicts the books of her father’s library as both silent, solitary endeavors and as a vocal, even loquacious, literary community:

> Ich hatte, in meine Lektüre versunken, Zeit und Ort vergessen. Nun erinnerten mich die Bücher, wo ich war:
> ‘Schieb dein kleines Hinterteil beiseite’, sagte ein dicker Ratgeber, an dem ich mich abgestützt hatte.
> ‘Es ist wirklich nicht zum Aushalten, das sein Kind so schlechte Manieren hat’, wandte Bert Brecht ein.
> ‘Und so aufdringlich ist’, sagte Olga aus ‘Drei Schwestern’.
> ‘Und mal ein Bad nehmen müssen’, fügte die bissige Olga hinzu.83

Here books simultaneously allow the narrator to escape from the social world through the act of reading, but also form a social world of their own, speaking to the narrator directly. Though this dialogue is presented as the imaginative reverie of a child, it is suggestive of the power of books, despite their inanimacy, to communicate with their readers. This communication does not remain strictly in the realm of imaginary and literary, however. After reporting Olga’s comment on the narrator’s bathing habits, the author writes, “Da sie Lehrerin einer Mädchenschule war und wusste, wovon sie sprach, latschte ich gemächlich ins Badezimmer, wo ich von Seifenschaum,

83 Ibid., 44-45.
Given the rapidity in which the child Gila falls under Olga’s sway, this imagined exchange could initially give the impression that books are just as manipulative as newspapers and oral storytelling. Yet the narrator’s willingness to take a bath is presented as entirely her decision, reached due to the narrator’s confidence in the speaker’s judgment. The placid lexical items latschete and gemächlich add to the unhurried and uncompelled impression.

Indeed, when describing books, the narrator consistently places the agency with the reader, rather than the author. Mirroring the metaphors comparing oral storytelling to nourishment, the narrator also describes books as edible: “Die Bücher habe ich gekaut und geschluckt, und ihre Bilder und Geschmack und ihre Musik durchtränkten meinen Alltag.” Despite the thematic similarity between this analogy and those describing oral storytelling, however, a grammatical difference sets them apart: whereas the food metaphors describing oral storytelling all place the storyteller as the sentence’s agent and the story’s recipient as the sentence’s grammatical patient—“ein fremd Klingender, süßer Brei, mit dem meine Mutter uns voll stopfte [emphasis added]”—the narrator’s food metaphor regarding books situates the recipient as the active party. A connection can thus be drawn between the propagandistic nature the narrator ascribes to oral storytelling and her positioning of power within the constellation of the storytelling act. The speaker, by virtue of their immediacy, their extemporaneousness, and their sentience, is in control not only of the story, but also of the message embedded within. Books, in contrast, are consumed by the reader at their leisure, removed from the author through the static and exportable nature of the written word, in keeping with Benjamin’s statement from “Die Erzähler” that the narrator “ist

---

84 Ibid., 45.
85 Ibid., 54.
uns in seiner lebendigen Wirksamkeit keineswegs durchaus gegenwärtig” as well as Barthes’ famed argument from his “Death of the Author” that a text’s “source, its voice,” lies not in its writing, but rather in its reading. For all the ideology an author attempts to weave into their text, its success is dependent wholly on the reader and their interpretation.

But while the reader is the paramount figure when it comes to a text’s interpretation, the author is not fully dead in Lustiger’s novel. Both she and her father are writers, with the narrator favoring fiction and her father history, and the topic of textual productions is addressed at numerous points throughout So sind wir. As with newspapers and oral storytelling, the narrator’s attitude towards books is complex and thorny, but whereas her criticism of the first two genres falls on the side of the recipient—they are manipulative, they present a false sense of reality—her criticism of books is lodged entirely at their creators. Writers, she argues multiple times in the novel, are self-centered and their writing is merely a quest to enlarge their already extensive egos: “Immer nur um dich selbst, wie all den anderen Egozentrikern, die sich Schriftsteller nennen, zu Recht Schriftsteller nennen, denn Schriftstellerei ist eine miese egozentrische Angelegenheit.”

Though this critique of writers may seem biting—and indeed it is—the narrator’s stance is more nuanced than simple derision. Still fitting within her conception of writers as egocentric, writing is also portrayed in the book as therapeutic. The entire aim of writing So sind wir, after all, is to untangle the many memory knots that the narrator delineates, or, as she puts in the short prologue

87 Lustiger, 63. See also pg. 145: “Sie seien, so habe ich gesagt, einfach geborene Heuchler, die vorgeben würden, ihre Innenwelt nach außen zu kehren, um eine gelangweilte und immer stumpfsinniger werdende Gesellschaft zu unterhalten, aber in Wirklichkeit schrieben sie doch immer nur für sich selbst.”
“förmlich aus allen Poren auszuschwitzen, was man Erinnerungsgiftstoff nennen könnte.”88 Later, in her extended conversation with Dominique, the narrator once again indicates the healing and enlightening nature of writing. Discussing an account of her father’s life that she discovers as an adult in a book, the narrator states, “Erst jetzt, weil ich das Buch schreibe, diese Fußnoten zur Familie, habe ich erfasst, was in seinem Lebensbericht abhanden gekommen ist.”89 The narrator’s enhanced insight into her father’s writing is developed only when she engages in writing herself. For all the vanity she ascribes to it, writing also has the curative effect of broadening and deepening the writers’ understanding of both themselves and the world around them.

In addition to its therapeutic and edifying qualities, books also differ from newspapers and oral storytelling in their association in Lustiger’s novel with a wide range of emotions. The narrator charges newspapers with intentionally purging reality of its passion and affect, while she imputes to oral storytelling a limited emotional bandwidth, capable of transmitting only an often guilt-tinged joyfulness. Books, however, are more emotionally nuanced. Like oral storytelling, they inspire some positive feelings in their readers, as indicated when the narrator relates books to “[k]leine und große Wunder” and states “und während ich las, beruhigte ich mich.”90 But the spectrum of emotions roused by books does not end there, as it does with storytelling. The narrator also associates books with negative or neutral emotions, describing her reactions to reading with terms such as “staunend,” “aufgeregt,” “ängstlich,” “zornig,” “verrückt,” “erschrak,” and “Verwirrung.”91 Some of these terms appear as the narrator recounts her childhood reading experiences, especially those that were unsanctioned by her parents and involved illicit themes.

---

88 Ibid., 7.
89 Ibid., 163.
90 Ibid., 54, 55.
91 Ibid., 48, 54, 55, 56, 58.
such as sex or the Holocaust. The majority, however, are found as the narrator describes the discovery of her father’s autobiographical writing, tucked away in a volume that she unintentionally stumbles upon in a Parisian bookstore while out shopping with her young son.

Due to her father’s predisposition to silence, the narrator remained until this moment in the bookstore largely ignorant about her father’s experience during the Second World War. She knew he had been imprisoned in Nazi camps and had somehow managed to survive, but any further details were unknown to her. And as her father did not engage in the oral storytelling of her mother and grandmother, information about this dark chapter of his life would not come to her viva voce. Rather, the narrator’s knowledge of her father’s life arrives as well through the written word. “Alles weiß ich aus Büchern,” the narrator states towards the end of a section delineating her childhood relationship to books. The next section sharply pivots to her adult life and to her father, opening with the statement, “Auch den Leidensweg meines Vaters habe ich in einem Buch nachgelesen,” thereby expanding the educational potential of books to include one’s own heritage and identity.\textsuperscript{92} The narrator then recounts this unsettling and unexpected experience of finding an elaborate account of her father’s wartime traumas. Mirroring those scenes from the narrator’s childhood, in which her father read so raptly that he was disconnected from the world around him, the narrator describes reading the narrative of her father’s life, becoming overwhelmed by the heretofore unknown horrifying details, and disengaging from all sense of reality: “Alle kamen mir geistesgestört vor.”\textsuperscript{93} But whereas nothing could pierce through the veil of her father’s diligent newspaper reading, not even his young daughter surreptitiously sidling up to him, it is precisely the narrator’s four-year-old son that is able to draw the narrator out of her father’s terrifying

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 54.
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., 55.
account and back into the physical world surrounding her: “‘Gila,’ sagte mein Sohn, und augenblicklich versöhnte ich mich mit dieser lärrenden, gewöhnlichen und ahnungslosen Realität, die mich umgab.” This difference between her father’s behavior and her own could be read, on the one hand, as furthering the gender binary that the narrator repeatedly instantiates throughout the novel, suggesting, as she does, that her father believes that “Kinderbetreuung Mutterarbeit ist.” But her contrasting reaction to her son’s interruption can also be read as a shift in memory paradigms as her familial past travels through the generations and becomes increasingly removed from its source, i.e., the narrator’s father.

Though their interactions with their respective progeny may differ, the narrator and her father prove similar in other ways. They are both, after all, writers who have authored numerous books, reports, and stories, including not only the autobiographical account of her father’s that the narrator recounts finding, but also *So sind wir* itself. Indeed, while the narrator derides the silence that overshadows her father’s and her family’s lives, the silence can only be understood as speechlessness, given that, as Spoerri puts it, “das Schweigen wird schreibend gebrochen, sowohl vom Vater, der in einem Buch über seine Erlebnisse berichtet, als auch durch den Roman seiner Tochter.” Even the narrator’s indictment of her father’s emotionlessness is then more nuanced than it originally seems. Eichenberg identifies the narrator’s father “als eine Leitfigur in der Gefühlschronik der Familie, die notwendige Gegenfigur für die eigene Identität.” But despite this claim that the narrator stands in contrast to her father, the narrator identifies herself as naturally tending towards the logical and unemotional side of the scale. It is her father’s rigid insistence on

94 Ibid., 56.  
95 Ibid., 18.  
96 Spoerri, 44.  
97 Eichenberg, 167.
the frivolity of all emotion that pushes the narrator to the middle. In her extended conversation with Dominique that occupies the second half of the book, the narrator explains her father’s attempts to erase all feeling from his life, before stating, “‘Aufgrund und infolge dieser Tilgung,’ sagte ich zu Dominique, ‘hat er mich elenden Kopfmenschen zur Gefühlschronistin unserer Familie gemacht.’”98 Notably, the narrator’s relationship to emotion is morphologically bound to her role as a writer, whereas her predisposition to logic is tied to her personhood in general. It is in her writing—and specifically in her writing of this book—that the narrator finds herself engaging with emotions more robustly, tracing and recording them, and examining their role in her familial life. Similarly, the narrator’s father experiences his deepest encounter with emotion in his writing. Though the narrator criticizes his lack of feeling in interpersonal relationships, a different version of him emerges as she reads his autobiographical report discovered in the Parisian bookstore. As with his social temperament, his writing is not sentimental. Emotions are obscured to the extent that the narrator describes his first-person narrative voice as “ein[,] Ich wie aus Holz.”99 But through her reading of this report, which chronicles her father’s miraculous escape from a death march and subsequent rescue by American soldiers, the narrator comes to understand her father’s dispassion differently:

Mein Vater hat sich und seine Gefühle nie zur Kenntnis genommen, denn sie hätten nicht nur gestört, sondern auch zerstört, worum es ihm und den anderen Überlebenden ging, um das Mitgefühl der Leser. Was für ein auswegloses Anrennen gegen die eigene Person, habe ich gedacht, gleichzeitig diesen Versuch wegen seiner Verbissenheit bewundert. Und ich habe auch gespürt, wozu so ein Ich wie aus Holz imstande ist. Gefühllos stellt sich mein Vater dar, um die anderen fühlen zu lassen. Und das ist das Fazit: Während ich die Leser im Auge behalte, schenkt er ihnen ihr Herz.100

98 Lustiger, 164.
99 Ibid., 62.
100 Ibid., 63.
There is no hidden reservoir of sentimentality lurking behind her father’s writing, but in this moment the narrator reassesses her father’s emotional detachment. He is not impassive because he wishes to deny reality or to control it, as the narrator originally surmised. Paradoxically, he eschews emotions in his own speech and writing out of compassion for his fellow human being, to spare them the emotional disturbance and destruction that his traumatic history might cause in them. He is unfeeling, so that others may feel. In contrast to newspapers and oral storytelling, then, which instrumentalize (un)emotionality to fulfill specific calculated goals, books are presented in *So sind wir* as anti-didactic, creating a semiotic space in which readers are able to negotiate meaning for themselves. At their most successful, books recounting memory and past experience are not a denial of emotion, but rather a neutral space in which emotions can be cultivated and explored.

*iv. A Textual Simulation of Oral Storytelling*

The narrator’s conclusion regarding the differences between her father’s writing and her own is significant for a second reason. The latter half of the sentence—“schenkt er ihnen ihr Herz”—refers to her father’s writing style, which the narrator finds herself envious of, but the first part of the sentence—“Während ich die Leser im Auge behalte”—speaks to a salient and distinctive feature of the narrator’s writing: her acute attentiveness to the reader. As the narrator explores the annals of her familial past and present, it is always markedly clear that this exploration is occurring in tandem with another, namely the reader. The narrator does not merely narrate events from her life and those of her family members, but narrates them explicitly to someone, addressing the reader directly, engaging with them in a dialogue, preempting questions and reactions, and, ultimately, appealing to them for empathy. The relationship that the narrator cultivates with her
reader is largely intimate and breezy. Save for one unexplained instance in which the narrator addresses the reader as “Sie,” informal pronouns are used, accompanied occasionally by colloquial words and spellings such as “na” and “nix.” Further facets of the narrator’s relationship with the reader are found in her comments on the narrating process or in the narrator’s frequent criticisms of herself as a writer. Though not explicitly addressing the reader, these moments serve a similar purpose, in that they momentarily lift the curtain between the performance and the audience, granting readers behind-the-scenes access into the author-cum-narrator’s mindset, thereby engendering a sense of familiarity.

Both the instances in which the narrator addresses the reader directly and those in which she communicates with them more obliquely fall under the umbrella of metanarration. Often used interchangeably with the related, but distinct term “metafiction,” metanarration refers specifically to self-reflexive utterances that address narration itself. Narratologist and literary scholar Ansgar Nünning provides a helpful distinction between the two concepts, stating that metafiction “refers to comments on the fictionality of the narrated text or of the narrator,” while metanarration, in contrast, “concerns the narrator’s reflections on the discourse or the process of narration.” In her repeated musings about the process of such narration, as well as her many remarks to the reader, which comment on both her authorial design and the reader’s reception, the narrator of So sind wir makes frequent use of metanarrative commentary. Her novel cannot, however, be understood as an example of metafiction, as Nünning states, “metafiction can by definition only appear in the context of fiction.” Despite its title-page designation as a Familienroman,

---

103 Ibid.
Lustiger’s novel does not profess to be fiction, nor does any scholarship regarding it treat it as such. Metanarration, on the other hand, can “be found in many non-fictional narrative genres and media,” as seen in So sind wir. Nünning and other narratologists draw another distinction between metafiction and metanarration: metafiction necessarily results “in the destruction of aesthetic illusion,” whereas metanarration can both work against and contribute to the illusion of a narrated world. As he explains further, “narrators can use metanarration to reinforce their claim to truth according to the convention of realism, or they can render obvious the constructedness and fictionality of the characters by drawing the reader’s attention to the fact that any further plot developments depend on their arbitrary decision.”

Though metafiction has been researched and discussed by narratologists for decades, with either William Gass or Robert Scholes often credited with coining the term in their respective 1970 works, metanarration did not become a common category of narratological inquiry until the early twenty-first century when it was taken up by Nünning as well as by Monika Fludernik. A similar concept is discussed, however, in Robyn Warhol’s 1986 article “Toward a Theory of the Engaging Narrator: Earnest Interventions in Gaskell, Stowe, and Eliot,” often cited as one of the two inaugural essays of feminist narratology. In this article, Warhol introduces further layers of delicacy into Gerald Prince’s 1973 essay, translated into English in 1980 as “Introduction to the Study of the Narratee.” Prince argues that a natural distance exists between the narratee and the

---

104 Ibid.
105 Ibid., 16, 17.
106 Ibid., 34.
108 The other being Susan Lanser’s “Toward a Feminist Narratology,” from the same year.
actual reader of a text, and that direct addresses to the narratee—what we would classify today as metanarration, and/or metalepsis—serve to increase this distance. Using nineteenth-century works of fiction by Anglosphere women writers, Warhol provides examples in which such direct addresses work not to discourage the reader from identifying with the narratee, but rather to encourage that identification, thus creating two categories of the narrator-narratee-reader relationship out of Prince’s one. The first, identified by Prince in his original essay, involves the distancing narrator, who “may evoke laughter, or even annoyance from an actual reader who cannot identify with the narratee.” 109 The second, identified by Warhol, involves the engaging narrator, whose task, in contrast, “is to evoke sympathy and identification from an actual reader who is unknown to the author and therefore infinitely variable and unpredictable.” 110 Whereas the distancing narrator “frequently reminds the narratee that the fiction is a game and the characters pawns,” the engaging narrator appeals to the narratee—and by extension, the reader—for compassion, sympathy, and assent.

The narrator of So sind wir, in her frequent addresses to the reader, can easily be categorized as an engaging narrator. The aforementioned familiarity bred between narrator and narratee through the use of informal pronouns and colloquialisms, as well as the high frequency and earnest candor of the narratorial interventions in Lustiger’s novel all work to meet the five criteria set out by Warhol to define an engaging narrator. 111 Instances in which the narrator

---

110 Ibid.
111 Warhol, “Towards a Theory of the Engaging Narrator,” 813-815. The five criteria are as follows: 1) The names by which the narratee is addressed; 2) The frequency of direct address to the narratee; 3) The degree of irony present in references to the narratee; 4) The narrator’s stance toward the characters; 5) The narrator’s implicit or explicit attitude toward the act of narration. While the narrator of So sind wir demonstrates a fair amount of irony in her narration, it is directed at herself just as often, if not more often, than it is towards the narratee. It can therefore
presupposes the narratee’s reaction and either refutes potential contradictions or critiques or congratulates the narratee on their perception and acuity dot the first half of Lustiger’s novel. “Ach, Leser, du hältst mich jetzt wohl für mutig,” the narrator states directly before describing her cowardice, thus disproving such a notion.112 Later, when transitioning to the first chapter discussing the state of Israel and its founding, she anticipates anti-Zionist objections: “Ja, nörgelnder Leser, ich ahne jetzt, was du denkst. Du hältst diesen Übergang für demagogisch.”113 After listing potential criticisms of the telling of Israel’s story from the perspective of Zionist Jews, the narrator admits that this argument has merit, but explains that this is the story and the perspective she has received and is, therefore, the only one she is capable of telling: “Ich stimme dir aufrichtig zu. […] Und die andere Seite? Kann sich ein Palästinenser mit abmühen. Ich erzähle jetzt, was ich von meiner Familie und der Staatsgründung weiß.” 114 Though a certain degree of sarcasm and flippancy is detectable in this passage—“nörgelnder Leser”; “Kann sich ein Palästinenser mit abmühen”—such preemptions of the narratee’s reactions counter any reluctance the narratee might have to align themselves with the narrator. Warhol describes this rhetorical move as a tendency in engaging narrators “to inscribe their narratees through overjustifying their own assertions,” but clarifies that “they usually do so in the spirit of sympathetically and earnestly attempting to convert the narratees to their own points of view.”115

be argued that this irony is employed not to distance the narratee from the storyworld, but is rather simply a facet of the narrator’s personality. As she states at one point in the novel, “Ein bisschen Ironie, mehr braucht man nicht, um gewappnet zu sein, ein bisschen Ironie.” (Lustiger, 31.) The other four of Warhol’s criteria are easily met in Lustiger’s novel.
112 Lustiger, 67.
113 Ibid., 114.
114 Ibid.
115 Warhol, “Towards a Theory of the Engaging Narrator,” 814. Prince describes a similar concept, termed “surjustifications,” but focuses solely on what such narrative interventions reveal about the narratee, rather than on the relationship between narrator and narratee. He describes them thusly: “Overjustifications always provide us with interesting details about the
Lustiger’s narrator employs another engagement strategy when, throughout the first half of the novel, she regularly poses questions to herself that function either to move the plot along or to clarify a previous statement. The first of these occurs a mere two pages into the first chapter, after the narrator’s initial description of her father’s perpetual newspaper reading. “Fand er, was er suchte?” the narrator asks. The query is answered in the next sentence, which begins a separate paragraph: “Nie fand er sie.” This pattern is repeated through this and the next three chapters: at either the beginning or end of a paragraph or section, an interrogative statement appears, propelling the narrator forward into the next anecdote or explanation. These are not mere rhetorical questions, however. Their function is not to make or drive home a point, but rather to elicit an answer. “Meine allererste Zeitungserinnerung?” the narrator inquires, before describing the exact memory sought in the question. As evidenced by this example, many of the questions are also notable for their unorthodox syntax; frequently they are sentence fragments, exhibiting the kind of informal language more typically found in spoken conversation. Drawing their conversational qualities out even further, a few of the questions are presented as orphaned dependent clauses, a grammatical phenomenon generally employed in oral language when repeating a question that was not heard or responded to upon its initial asking. A subsection of the fourth chapter opens with “Wo sie sich getroffen haben mögen? Keine Ahnung,” while a new paragraph two pages later begins, “Was er ersehnte? Die Aufhebung aller Klassen.” These questions, with their markers of spoken communication, transform the narrator’s prose from a monoglossic chronicle of her narratee’s personality, even though they often do so in an indirect way; in overcoming the narratee’s defense, in prevailing over his prejudices, in allaying his apprehensions, they reveal them.” Prince, “Introduction to the Study of the Narratee,” 15.

116 Lustiger, 10.
117 Ibid.
118 Ibid., 16.
119 Ibid., 106, 108.
familial past and present into a dialogue between narrator and narratee. As the addressee of the text as a whole, the narratee must also be the recipient of these rephrased questions and their answers, rendering the first half of the novel one side of a conversation, with the other side—that of the narratee—implied. The narratee, then, is conscripted into being an active participant in the narration, heightening their involvement in and narrowing their distance from the subjects at hand. With this strategy, the narratee—and the reader for whom they are a proxy—becomes necessarily engaged with the text and its story, as they take part in its creation.

That the narrator views the narratee as an active contributor to the text is explicitly acknowledged in the second chapter, after the narrator recounts an anecdote and then hastily admits that she had fabricated the final detail. She did this, she explains, not because of the content of the story necessarily, but rather “weil ich einfach erfinden muss.” She clarifies further: “Ein Grund ist wohl, dass ich mir den Leser vorstelle und sein ganz und gar gleichgültiges Gesicht, während ich mich langsam Satz für Satz vor ihm entblöße.” Here the reader becomes a corporeal figure, with him—she identifies the reader as male—and the narrator occupying the same physical space and engaged in the same activity, though the reader in this scenario is passive, merely watching indifferently as the story’s teller undresses. This passivity is subverted, however, at the end of the paragraph, as the narrator states, “Wer das wahre Gesicht hinter der Maske erblicken will, muss suchen. Denn nackt bin ich nie oder nur dann, wenn auch du es bist.” Similar to the dialogic questions dispersed throughout the first four chapters, this statement converts the passive experience of absorbing another’s narrated story to an active and communal endeavor. Rather than simply observing the narrator as she metaphorically undresses, the narratee must also perform an

120 Ibid., 46.
121 Ibid.
122 Ibid., 47.
action—seeking—in order to see her true, uncovered self. The conjunction *denn* in the next sentence implies that this seeking also takes the form of undressing; the narrator and narratee must both be naked for the storytelling to be effective. The strength of the narrator’s performance in is therefore dependent on the narratee’s reciprocal willingness to undress and uncover himself. The narratee, then, is no silent observer, but rather a vital participant in the narratorial process.

The steady appearance of preemptive counterarguments, imagined dialogues, and demands of action on the part of the narratee, all serve to involve them in the narratorial act, thus drawing them in and aligning them with the narrator’s position vis-à-vis her family, her sense of German and/or Jewish identity, and her relationship to memory and trauma. The instances of metanarration that do not address the reader directly work towards the same end, entangling and implicating the narratee in the narrative process by exposing its inner wiring. Such an effect occurs in the metanarrative moments when the narrator edits herself while in the act of telling the story, as when she concludes a passage of speculative motivations regarding her father’s newspaper habits with “Ach, ich merke schon, zu viele ‘vielleicht.’”\(^{123}\) In similar metanarrative comments, the narrator works out not the structure of her prose while she is writing it, but rather comes to understand her own feelings and opinions better through the act of writing: “Und komisch, während ich dies niederschreibe und versuche, sie nach besten Kräften lächerlich zu machen, denke ich nicht etwa: Diese arme Frau. […] Sondern dass ich ein Feigling bin.”\(^{124}\) These instances serve to humanize the narrator, to depict her as imperfect and her narration subjective. She makes plain that she is not “allmächtig [und] auch nicht allwissend,” as Eichenberg describes Lustiger’s narrator; rather she is acutely aware of her own flaws and limited perspective.\(^{125}\) The self-critique suggested in these

\(^{123}\) Ibid., 25.

\(^{124}\) Ibid., 95-96.

\(^{125}\) Eichenberg, 166.
moments becomes outright self-criticism whenever the narrator feels herself to have obscured the truth or to be reluctant in its telling in any way. In these instances, she addresses herself, not the reader, with cruel insults and derisive language, calling herself “Lügnerin” on multiple occasions and commanding at one point, “Los, du feiges Aas!”\(^{126}\) This self-deprecation casts the narrator as vulnerable and pitiable, appealing to the sympathy of the reader yet again. That this engagement occurs not only through direct address to the narratee, but also through other instances of metanarration indicates an intersection of Warhol’s engaging narrator and Nünning’s conception of metanarration. This intersection includes metanarration, whether explicitly addressed to the narratee or not, that serves the goals of the engaging narrator as outlined by Warhol: “to evoke recognition and identification in the person who holds the book and reads.”\(^{127}\)

In certain ways, Warhol and Nünning both already address this (meta)narratorial position in their respective works, but when combined, their two conceptions complement and complete each other, yielding a hybrid narratological category: engaging metanarration. Warhol’s proposed engaging narrator limits her particular field of inquiry to instances of direct address to the narratee, ignoring other moments of metanarration. As feminist narratology—the field launched in part by Warhol’s article—was the first narratological subfield to view narrative form as contingent on cultural and social context, a restricted field of inquiry results in a narrower understanding of the relationship between narrative and culture. Nünning’s delineation of different forms of metanarration, meanwhile, adheres to norms of classical narratology, limiting its scope to cataloging different forms of metanarrative commentary and providing neither an explanation of their textual effects nor a description of their sociocultural origins. In his essay, Nünning does

\(^{126}\) Lustiger, 12, 17, 55.
\(^{127}\) Ibid., 811.
point to a form of metanarration that is similar to Warhol’s engaging narrator, but he devotes a scant three sentences to its explication, terming it “distance-reducing metanarration,” which “reduce[s] the distance to the fictitious world.”¹²⁸ This is opposed to “distancing-enhancing metanarration,” which “increase[s] the distance between the reader and the narrated story.”¹²⁹ Though Nünning’s “distance-reducing metanarration” casts a wider net than Warhol’s “engaging narrator,” in that it includes both metanarration that addresses the reader directly and metanarration that does not, his description of this narratological phenomenon is lacking two aspects that Warhol’s provides: its relation to gender and the intended extra-textual effect on the reader.

Warhol’s essay on distancing and engaging narrators introduced what would later become feminist narratology solely in its last paragraph. After expounding on differences and outlining parameters for these two types of narrators, Warhol ponders whether the lack of attention paid to engaging narrators in previous scholarship is due to the preponderance of such narrators in works written by women and their relative absence in works written by men. Written in 1986, before Judith Butler distinguished between sex and gender and introduced notions of performativity into gender discourse, Warhol’s assertion regarding the gendered nature of the engaging narrator is seemingly mired in the prevailing Second Wave feminist norms of that time. Her alignment of men with distancing narrators and women with engaging narrators upholds both the gender binary and essentialist views of masculinity and femininity. Without phrasing it in such Butlerian terms, scholars as early as 1987 objected to Warhol’s gendering of distancing and engaging narrators, and by 1999 Warhol herself had shifted her feminist narratological focus “in the spirit of 1990s

¹²⁸ Nünning, 84.
¹²⁹ Ibid.
The feminist narratology of the past, she writes, “tends to treat gender as a ‘prior category,’ focusing on women writers and women readers.” In contrast, the progressive feminist narratology of the late 1990s would “focus not on the sex of author or reader (since that entails drawing certain stereotypical and essentializing assumptions about what ‘a woman’ does or likes or thinks or feels), and would not assume a direct correspondence between a reader’s sex and his or her gender.” In other words, the feminist narratology of the 1990s and onward would examine how gender is produced through narrative processes, rather than prior to them.

Warhol’s theories on gender and narrative, both earlier and recent, find a curious echo in Lustiger’s novel. As discussed above, the narrator, too, formulates a schema that links gender and narrative. The first half of her novel constructs a binary relationship with femininity and storytelling on one side and masculinity and silence on the other. While she does esteem storytelling more highly than silence, it does not escape her critique either: her mother’s frequent oral storytelling is portrayed as entertaining, yet didactic, if not fully propagandistic. In mirroring oral storytelling through the engagement strategies that the narrator employs in the first half of her novel—the metanarration that renders the reader the narrator’s conversational partner—the narrator herself employs the very aspects of oral storytelling that she criticizes in her mother’s tales. With her many direct addresses to the reader and her frequent self-deprecating comments, the narrator appeals to the reader for empathy and attempts, in the words of Warhol, to “convert

---

[the reader] to [her] own point of view.”\textsuperscript{131} As the narrator and her mother are both women, the narrator’s replication of oral storytelling techniques in writing upholds not only her own gender binary, but also that drawn by Warhol in her 1986 essay distinguishing distancing from engaging narrators.

But the narrator’s rampant use of metanarration throughout the first half of her novel serves another purpose as well. These narrative strategies, seen by many theorists as serving to align the reader with the narrator and thereby the author, disappear in the second half of the novel. Here there is a page, blank except for the words \textit{Zweiter Teil} and from there, the entire narrative voice of the novel changes.\textsuperscript{132} No longer is the narrator in conversation with the reader and no longer does she straightforwardly narrate family memories. Rather, the second half of \textit{So sind wir} is constructed as one long conversation between the narrator and her friend Dominique while they attend a cocktail party one evening in Paris. Dominique is French and gentile and the conversation, which spans the last four chapters of the novel and occasionally involves other party attendees, touches on a myriad of topics, from writing as an occupation to social gossip to acupuncture. But the recurring theme is, as in the first half of the book, the narrator’s family history. No matter how far afield their conversation may stray, Dominique and the narrator always turn back to the topics of the narrator’s mother’s childhood in Israel and her father’s experiences in the Holocaust.

No reason is ever given as to why the dominating theme of their conversation should be the childhoods of the narrator’s parents or why Dominique, in particular, is so eager to hear tales of death marches and declarations of independence that she constantly redirects any conversational tangents with questions of what happened next. This sudden narrative shift, however, does have a

\textsuperscript{131} Warhol, 814.
\textsuperscript{132} Lustiger, 133.
strong and abrupt impact on the positioning of the reader. As the active role of conversational partner has shifted from the extradiegetic reader to the intradiegetic Dominique, the reader suddenly finds themselves on the sidelines, the stakes having therefore been lowered. When juxtaposed with the first half of the book, the 125-page long conversation that concludes Lustiger’s novel functions as a simulated game—a scrimmage—in which the narrator can express opinions and emotions that might not be easily palatable to her average reader. Alongside relating her parents’ pasts to Dominique, the narrator engages in a critique of European culture that is both incisive and caustic. She accuses Europe of masking a Christian-centric worldview with empty rhetoric of tolerance and integration, insinuating the insincerity of such Christian watchwords as “Sünde, Dogma,” and “Nächstenliebe.” Elsewhere, she denounces what she perceives as Europe’s use of the United States as a “Sündenbock” to distract from European cultural imperialism and notions of superiority. At one point in the conversation with Dominique and a Frenchman, the narrator attempts to clarify the Frenchman’s anti-American argument, saying, “Du meinst also, dass es sich bei den Amerikanern um einen triebmäßigen, sozusagen angeborenen Jähzorn handelt und bei uns, den Europäern, um eine kulturell erworbene Angriffstrategie,” to which the Frenchman simply replies, “Ja, ganz genau.” In a further criticism, the narrator charges Europe with privileging rationalism and reason to the exclusion of any other means of knowing, as in her description of Dominique at one point as a “Vertreterin des europäischen Geistes und der cartesianischen Vernunft.” That these criticisms appear for the first time in conversation with Dominique and not in her earlier conversation with the reader is both significant

133 Ibid., 141.
134 Ibid., 203.
135 Ibid., 204.
136 Ibid., 151.
and canny. Having spent the previous 125 pages engaging with the reader and appealing to them for empathy through metanarration, the reader is now primed to align themselves with the narrator and her side of the discussion, even when her perspective may be at odds with the initial impulses of the reader, who is most likely European.

This manipulative narrative effect that the narrator creates between the first and second halves of her novel echoes the propagandistic qualities of her mother’s storytelling practices. She may be expressing a wider range of emotion than her mother ever did while describing her idyllic Israeli childhood, but the narrator, in her careful cultivation of a connection with her reader, employs narrative to the same ends. The middle ground of books that the narrator identifies between her dichotomous poles of storytelling/speech and newspaper/silence, is abandoned in this second half of the novel and the narrator’s statement comparing her father’s writing to her own becomes clearer. “Während ich die Leser im Auge behalte, schenkt er ihnen ihr Herz,” the narrator states as she describes reading her father’s account of his time in the Holocaust. Where her father uses writing and narrative to create an open semiotic space in which the reader can create meaning for themselves, the narrator addresses the reader directly, wooing them to her side, before directly and explicitly imparting meaning to them. The high esteem in which the narrator holds books as a means of memory transmission reveals itself in this second half of Lustiger’s novel to be aspirational. Rather than an inherent and constant feature of the medium, the open emotional space the narrator senses in her father’s writing is merely one possibility of many. And, as she openly guides the reader’s emotional passage through the novel, it is a possibility that continues to elude her.
“Am Anfang meiner Familiengeschichte stand eine Übersetzung”: so begins an anecdote outlining the murky nature of the narrator’s family history in Katja Petrowskaja’s 2015 story collection *Vielleicht Esther*.¹ She explains this translation and its connection to her familial past further: in the mid-nineteenth century, the narrator’s great-great-great-grandfather, Simon Geller, founded a school that specialized in teaching deaf-mute (“Taubstumme”) Jewish children to communicate. Captivated by Simon’s personality and his project, a prominent writer penned an article about the school in a Yiddish newspaper. Sixty years later, the article was translated into Russian by Simon’s grandson—the narrator’s great-grandfather—and a further sixty years later, the narrator’s mother rediscovered the translation in an archive in Kyiv. The Yiddish original, however, was at this point nowhere to be found. “So gründet die Herkunft unserer Familie in einer fragwürdigen Übersetzung ohne Original,” states Petrowskaja as she concludes this tale, “und ich erzähle die Geschichte dieser Familie nun auf Deutsch, ohne dass es für sie je ein russisches Original gegeben hätte.”² The story of this missing original manages to capture a number of the main themes present in Petrowskaja’s work: the transnational and interlingual character of European Jewish culture, the problematic nature of the archive as a source of knowledge, the role of texts in constructing the narrator’s sense of identity and belonging, and the complicated function of the German language in her expression of said identity and belonging.

² Ibid., 52-53.
Despite the bounty of topics that manifest in this single anecdote, the theme most scholars have grasped onto when discussing it is that of origins and their authenticity. Immediately before quoting the same passage, Andree Michaelis-König writes that “[w]hat the narrator reconstructs as her family history is sometimes so far from its original meaning that one might doubt its authenticity altogether.”

Similarly, Dora Osborne emphasizes the lack of original: “the narrator has no access to an original version of her family history and must produce this with the means available to her.”

Maria Roca Lizarazu, too, accentuates the significance often attached to a factual or authentic origin story: “these various transmissions and translations of the initial story considerably complicate the ontological status of this founding event.”

Indeed, Lizarazu considers origins and originals to be fundamental to family narrative in general: “[a]ny narrative that is concerned with the family tree and the counting of generations presupposes an origin from which one can count and which can be reconstructed.”

While all three of these critics correctly point to the nebulous and untraceable status of the narrator’s family origin story, their emphasis on its importance and their tone of lament is misplaced. As the narrator indicates at the end of this anecdote, in relaying this tale in a German-language book without having first written it in her native tongue of Russian, she is actively choosing to leave behind her own origins. And as the story of Simon Geller and the article about him appears a good fifty pages into the book—after numerous other stories and anecdotes—it is clear that origins and beginnings are not the narrator’s  

---

6 Ibid.
primary concern. What’s more, as the narrator firmly states that the origin of her family’s history is the existing translation and not the missing original, her conception of “origins” seems in keeping with the Foucauldian notion that “all beginnings can never be more than recommencements or occultation”—in other words, that searching for a definitive beginning or origin will always be like grasping at smoke. Throughout Vielleicht Esther, the narrator distances herself from any conception of identity that relies on a stable, chronological understanding of family and history, and instead embraces the nebulosity, contradiction, and fluidity of her past, advancing a notion of identity based on interconnected, simultaneously existing nodes of belonging. In her rejection of institutionalized memory spaces, her use of various web metaphors, and her reliance on intertextuality, Vielleicht Esther puts forward a notion of belonging that does not seek to fill the gaps and resolve the uncertainties of family history, but rather that accommodates them, as it is based on synchronic affiliation rather than diachronic continuity.

i. Institutionalized Memory Spaces and their Intercultural Discontents

For Petrowskaja, who was born in Kyiv in 1970, the three most straightforward nodes of belonging derive from her status as a Russian Jewish émigré living in Germany. With reference to this segment of the German population more broadly, Adrian Wanner describes the three branches of this “tripartite identity” as “a Russian linguistic and cultural origin, a Jewish ‘ethnicity’ (in most cases without a religious allegiance), and German citizenship and the use of the German language as a medium of literary expression.” As more than 200,000 Russian Jews have relocated to

Germany since the collapse of the Soviet Union—nearly octupling Germany’s Jewish population—Petrowskaja shares this tripartite identity with many others, including a number of Russian-Jewish writers who have emerged to great success on the German literary scene in the last twenty years.\(^9\) While the first wave of these Russian Jewish German writers were men like Wladimir Kaminer and Vladimir Vertlib, the more recent successes have been authored largely by women, including Lena Gorelik, Olga Grjasnowa, and Alina Bronsky alongside Petrowskaja. Unlike her contemporaries, however, all of whom immigrated to Germany with their parents as children or teenagers, Petrowskaja came to Germany as an adult, moving with her German husband from Moscow to Berlin in 1999.\(^10\) Only in her late twenties did she begin learning German and her first ventures in writing fiction did not come much earlier than 2012, when her first text was published.\(^11\) In 2013, Petrowskaja was awarded the Ingeborg Bachmann Prize, one of the most prestigious literary honors in Germany, for her short story “Vielleicht Esther,” which she then expanded into a book that was published two years later.

It is not merely Petrowskaja’s biography that differentiates her from her fellow Russian Jewish women writers; the content of her writing diverges from theirs as well. The debut novels of Gorelik, Grjasnowa, and Bronsky, among others, tell what Anke Biendarra calls “arrival narratives,” that is, “partially autobiographical literary accounts of the immigration experience.”\(^12\) Vielleicht Esther, in contrast, does not devote a single word to the narrator’s immigration

---


\(^10\) Wanner, 311.

\(^11\) Michaelis-König, 149.

\(^12\) Anke S. Biendarra, “Cultural Dichotomies and Lived Transnationalism in Recent Russian-German Narratives,” in *Transnationalism in Contemporary German-Language Literature*, ed. Elisabeth Herrmann, Carrie Smith-Prei, and Stuart Taberner (Rochester: Camden House, 2015), 212.
experience and only a handful of the 68 subsections include scenes that take place in Germany. Perhaps due at least in part to the unique circumstances of her migration, at issue in Petrowskaja’s book is not her personal experience “coming to terms with the trauma of displacement, and adapting to the culture of arrival”—topics that Biendarra associates with the works of Russian Jewish émigrés—but rather the stories of her various family members, spanning five generations temporally and Central and Eastern Europe geographically. The narrator tells of the aforementioned Simon Geller and his school for deaf Jewish children in mid-nineteenth-century Vienna, of Ozjel Krzewin, her great-grandfather, who continued this work in early-twentieth-century Warsaw and then Kyiv, and of Judas Stern, her great-uncle, who was executed by the Soviet government for an assassination attempt on a German official in Moscow in 1932. In addition to these pre-war episodes, Vielleicht Esther includes tales describing the fates the narrator’s various relatives during and after the Second World War, at the hands of both Nazi Germany and the Soviet regime: the titular “maybe Esther”—the narrator’s paternal great-grandmother whose name no one is entirely sure of, though it may have been Esther—who was casually shot on the streets of Kyiv by a German officer whom she had politely asked for directions; Anna and Ljolja, her maternal great-grandmother and great-aunt, murdered at Babi Yar; and Wassilij, her maternal grandfather, a non-Jewish ethnic Ukrainian, interned as a prisoner of war first by the Nazis in Mauthausen concentration camp and then by the Soviets in a gulag, only to return home 41 years later with no explanation as to his near half-century absence.

While these events are ordered chronologically in the book, at no point does Vielleicht Esther give the impression of a linear narrative, as the stories of the narrator’s relatives are punctuated by and mediated through the her pursuit of these stories. While much of the information the narrator possesses about her family comes directly from her parents—what memory theorist
Aleida Assmann terms “conversational remembering”—the stories that the narrator’s mother and father relate to their daughter are marked by gaps, half-truths, and uncertainties, ultimately leading the narrator to track down the missing information herself. Her search brings her to various institutionalized memory spaces, including archives, museums, and memorial sites, as well as firmly twenty-first century means of investigation, such as Google, Facebook, and Amazon. Yet the narrator’s quest to learn about her family history has little to do with “truth” or factuality; she knows that she will not be able to piece together a single coherent narrative from the fragments she possesses and in fact embraces the fictional element of her work. “Manchmal ist es gerade die Prise Dichtung, welche die Erinnerung wahrheitsgetreu macht,” she states at one point. Moreover, the narrator repeatedly rejects every institutionalized site of memory that she encounters. Archives in Poland and Russia, the German Historical Museum in Berlin, memorial sites at Auschwitz, Babi Yar, and Mauthausen: though all of these are spaces that traditionally present linear and lucid versions of history, the narrator comes to view these lieux de mémoire as overly sterile, impersonal environments that are inextricably mired in power relations and state control.

The “conversational remembering” the narrator engages in when discussing family history with her parents functions as part of what Assmann terms “soziales Gedächtnis”—an

---

14 Petrowskaja, 219.
15 Proposed by Pierre Nora, the term “lieux de mémoire” is set in relation to “milieux de mémoire”: social settings in which history, memories, and traditions are organically integrated into the present. “Lieux de mémoire,” in contrast, refers to objects, sites, or other forms of mediation and mnemonic devices that assisting in remembering the past when traditions and memories are no longer part of everyday life. See: Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” Representations 26 (1989): 7.
intergenerational and communicative means of transmitting memory via living beings.\textsuperscript{16} In contrast stands “das kulturelle Gedächtnis,” which is transgenerational, symbolic, and reliant on material carriers, such as books, photographs, museums, and archives, to transmit memory.\textsuperscript{17} Such material carriers assist in what Assmann sees to be the central task of culture: the “Übersetzung von Vergänglichem in Unvergängliches.”\textsuperscript{18} This immortalization is the ostensible objective behind the various archives the narrator visits, but once there, she finds that even in a controlled environment created specifically for the preservation of historic materials, the past cannot be sustained forever. While reading documents relating to her great-uncle Judas Stern’s 1932 attempted assassination of a German diplomat in the German Foreign Office archives in Berlin, the narrator finds that touching the materials in the slightest causes them to disintegrate in her hands: “Jeden Tag, wenn ich nach Hause gehe, bleiben an meinem Tisch kleine Papierstückchen mit gotischen Buchstaben aus dem Frühjahr 1932 zurück. Deutschland zerbröselt, wird immer unfassbarer. […] Je weiter ich lese, desto schneller zerfallen die Blätter.”\textsuperscript{19} The documents’ disintegration symbolizes the limits of the ability of cultural memory and its various organs to transform history into the Assmannian “Unvergängliches” and the ultimate inaccessibility of the past. Indeed, the documents are so frail and brittle that the narrator fears she will be the last person to handle them: “Ich stelle mir vor, wie am Ende des Lesens das Papier komplett zerfallen und das Wissen verschwunden wäre.”\textsuperscript{20} Were the documents to disintegrate completely with the narrator’s reading, the archived cultural memory would disappear, rendering whatever knowledge the

\textsuperscript{16} Assmann, 26.  
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 51.  
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 52.  
\textsuperscript{19} Petrowskaja, 151.  
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
narrator gleaned from them again part of social memory, but only for so long as the narrator is alive.

In addition to this more practical and material concern of the narrator, her sustained interactions with archives and their materials leave her increasingly skeptical as to their political role. This problematization of the archive has a long history. In his 1969 *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault points to the unique power of this institution when he asserts that the archive is “the law of what can be said.” A quarter century later, Derrida echoes this sentiment in his *Archive Fever*, arguing that “[t]here is no political power with control of the archive,” and stating more generally that “[n]othing is more troubled and more troubling” than the archive. Dora Osborne locates The narrator’s skepticism towards this historical and mnemonic institution as part of a larger “archival turn in memory culture,” in large part inaugurated by Derrida and his contemporaries. She characterizes the archival turn as a shift from “‘archive-as-source’ to ‘archive-as-subject’” and as “scrutiniz[ing] the workings of the archive as site of power and violence.” Such a frame is particularly fitting when the narrator delves into the trial of Judas Stern. A strong sense of shame and humiliation has all but erased the memory of the would-be assassin within the narrator’s family, leaving her with only the barest scraps of information about him and his deeds. The narrator, however, finds his crime improbable and his motivations impenetrable: “stellen Sie sich vor […] ein arbeitsloser parteiloser Jude fährt nach Leningrad, klaut einen Revolver, fährt zurück nach Moskau, lungert mehrere Tage unbemerkt vor der Botschaft

---

21 Foucault, 129.
23 Osborne, 255.
herum, wo es mehr Spitzel gibt als Menschen, und schießt auf einen deutschen Diplomaten—und
das im Moskau von 1932.”

As her family members can provide no insight into this baffling array of circumstances, however, the narrator realizes her best recourse is the archive of the secret police in the Lubyanka Building in Moscow. As the building has served for the last century as the headquarters of the Soviet Union’s and then Russia’s various secret police organizations (Cheka, the GPU, the NKVD, the KGB, and currently the FSB), it and the archives it contains are inescapably enmeshed with state power and repression. Submitting to these forces, she fears, would render her complicit in the state’s violent and coercive history: “Du kommst ins Archiv, berührst ein Blatt Papier, und schon arbeitest du in den Organen, bist eine von ihnen, du hältst dich an die Regeln, und doch wird dir mitgespielt, du bist in ihrer Gewalt. Du atmest ihre Luft, die Luft ist für alle, und schon bist du infiziert.” As any information she finds in the Lubyanka archives will have been recorded and maintained by the same authorities who arrested, tortured, and finally killed her great-uncle, her only informational resource for this chapter of her family history is hopelessly tainted, and will taint her in the process. In the end, she is so disturbed by these lopsided power relations that she has the necessary files sent to the Foreign Office Archives in Berlin, a building with its own contentious history, but more removed from the Soviet-born narrator’s own experience.

But it is not only the archives of her homeland’s government that the narrator finds troubling; archives in less politically charged locations yield problematic results as well. While researching Simon Geller’s Jewish school for the deaf, the narrator encounters a text outlining such institutions in Vienna from 1844 to 1926. The text does indeed mention a Simon Heller—

---

25 Petrowskaja, 148-49.
26 Ibid., 149.
due to the later Cyrillization of his name, it is unclear if his surname is Geller or Heller—but he is listed as the director of a school for the blind, not the deaf. Despite this discrepancy between the document and family memory, the narrator is assured that this must be her relative: “Das muss er sein, sagte die Dame im Archiv, in der kleinen Welt der Behindertenpädagogik kann es nur einen Simon Heller gegeben haben.”27 Other sources she encounters—including the Russian article translated from the vanished Yiddish original—confirm her family’s lore that Simon Geller instructed deaf children, indicating that the institutionalized and official status of archives does necessarily render them reliable sources.

Even when the narrator encounters archival material that is more trustworthy than this listing in Vienna and less obviously manipulated by state authority than in Lubyanka, she finds the information available to her still embroiled in the power structures that surround it. While visiting the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw the narrator is shown a photograph of the house where her family used to live. Indicated by the stars prominent on the chests of the people in the photograph, the narrator understands that this photo was taken in the Second World War, when Ulica Ciepła, the street her family had once lived on, had become part of the Warsaw Ghetto. The narrator’s family had left Warsaw in 1915, long before the Ghetto had been constructed and this photograph had been taken, but the house she is searching for is visible in the background nonetheless. Yet access to this element of her family’s history is granted to the narrator only through the exploitation of the persecuted Jews in the photograph. Writing on the politics of photography, John Tagg states that “like the state, the camera is never neutral. The representations it produces are highly coded, and the power it wields never its own.”28 In this case, the power

27 Ibid., 54.
wielded by the camera is likely that of a German soldier and in regarding the photograph, the narrator finds herself implicated in the Nazi oppression he personifies: “Viele, sehr viele Menschen sind auf der Straße, manche schauen mich an, voller Angst, als ob eine Gefahr von mir ausginge, als wäre ich der Fotograf, ein Täter.” Not only is the production of the photograph implicated in Nazi crimes, but its preservation is as well. The archivist explains to the narrator that he bought this photo “von einem Angehörigen der Wehrmacht, für siebzig Euro, ein guter Preis.” Osborne interprets this system as “replicat[ing] the power relations of the war in which the perpetrators exert control over the victims: Here, it is those working in the interest of Jewish families who want what German families can provide.” In working to preserve these materials principally for Jews such as the narrator who are searching for information about their ancestors—they are housed in the Jewish Genealogy and Family Heritage Center of the Jewish Historical Institute—the archives and the archivist himself become complicit in this preservation and perpetuation of Nazi oppression, and as she witnesses the photograph, this complicity grows to extend to the narrator as well.

In her article, Osborne focuses almost exclusively on this replication of historical power structures in the archive, but other institutionalized memory spaces are similarly problematized in Vielleicht Esther. Only a single scene in the book takes place in a museum, but the scene ends with as much disquietude as those in the archives and with even more emotional distress. Demonstrating the role of museums as sites of “public pedagogy,” the narrator visits the German Historical Museum in Berlin with her eleven-year-old daughter and finds herself in the difficult position of
having to explain aspects of the Holocaust to her partly Jewish child. An adult tour group catches up to them as they stand before a table of the Nuremberg laws. As the tour guide—the narrator remarks on the irony of having to use the word “Führerin” here—begins to explain the laws, the narrator’s daughter asks her mother where they stand on the chart. The narrator’s first impulse is to distance herself and her daughter from this chapter of history. Their family was already in Kyiv or possibly already evacuated, the narrator thinks, and in any case neither she nor her daughter were even born yet—“diese Tabelle habe nichts mit uns zu tun.” But before she has even gathered her thoughts sufficiently to respond to her daughter, a man from the tour group turns to her and says, “wir haben übrigens bezahlt,” implying that she and her daughter had purposefully and dishonestly sneaked into the tour group and therefore had no right to stand in this location and listen to the guide’s commentary. The presumption rankles the narrator, but rather than delivering her desired response, she finds herself driven to tears.

Wanner characterizes the narrator’s emotional reaction as a result of the juxtaposition of the “meticulous racial madness on the Nuremberg chart with the vigilant, self-righteous ‘law-and-order’ mentality of the German tourist,” and indeed, like her experience in the Warsaw archives, this moment in the museum replicates the power relations and social configurations of the war, with the German in-group ostracizing Jewish and Eastern European outsiders. This is a history the narrator would gladly distance herself from and attempts to, in both her near-response to her daughter’s question about the Nuremberg laws and in her reaction to the man’s comment: “als

33 Petrowskaja, 45.  
34 Ibid.  
35 Ibid., 46.  
36 Wanner, 315.
hätten wir diese Geschichte für acht Euro geklaut, obwohl, vielen Dank, so eine werde ich nicht klauen.\textsuperscript{37} On an emotional level rather than a cognitive one, however, the German tourist’s presumptuous and punctilious accusation forces her to reckon with lingering traces of Nazi ideology and the Holocaust in German society. If, as Steven Conn claims, “[m]useums are places where we can measure the distance between then and now,” the narrator’s experience in this museum causes her to realize that that distance, in some ways, is not so great.\textsuperscript{38} Her lack of choice in the matter, the undesired imposition of this past into her present, is emphasized by grammatical choices that position her as a passive participant in the action: “obwohl ich gar nicht weinte, etwas weinte in mir, ich wurde geweint.”\textsuperscript{39} This was not a reaction or a realization that the narrator was seeking; rather it emerges from the interaction between the museal space and those who exist in it. Throwing the difference between the Russian Jewish narrator and her German fellow museum-goers into sharper relief is, in Nora’s understanding, a primary function of museums, along with other spaces of memory. They are “signs of distinction and of group membership in a society that tends to recognize individuals only as identical and equal.”\textsuperscript{40} If the narrator can navigate her everyday life in Germany without attention being called to the disjunctures between her identity and family history and those of ethnic Germans, the museum forces her to acknowledge the extent of her non-belonging.

The last institutionalized memory space that the narrator encounters in Vielleicht Esther—the memorial site—leaves the narrator feeling similarly dazed, conflicted, and isolated. In the course of the book, the narrator visits three different memorial sites: Auschwitz, which she visits

\textsuperscript{37} Petrowskaja, 46.
\textsuperscript{38} Steven Conn, \textit{Do Museums Still Need Objects?} (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 17.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{40} Nora, 9.
as a nineteen-year-old on her first trip abroad; Babi Yar in the narrator’s hometown of Kyiv, a site that saw the massacre of tens of thousands of Jews, including the narrator’s great-grandmother and great-aunt; and Mauthausen concentration camp in Austria, where her grandfather was interned during the last years of the war. Her trip to Auschwitz is part of a group tour through Poland, but her visits to Babi Yar and Mauthausen are conducted intentionally, with the narrator seeking some sort of connection to or information about her family members whose fates were tied to these places. Neither the more happenstance trip nor the planned and purposed visits provide her with any sense of connection or understanding, however. As she is reporting on her experiences at Auschwitz many years hence, the narrator emphasizes that what she is reporting stems from sheer memory, starting sentence after sentence describing her time in Oświęcim with “Ich erinnere mich an…”41 This foregrounding of memory creates a sharp contrast when the narrator steps through the gate at Auschwitz, at which point, she writes, “machte mein Gedächtnis halt. Von diesem Augenblick an erinnere ich mich an nichts.”42 It is not until the next day, when the narrator finds herself in a church in a southern Polish town, that her memories suddenly recommence. No concrete reason is given for this gap in her memory, but enough clues exist in the passage to suggest it is related to a sense of trauma. Seemingly unable to bring herself to utter the name, the narrator never actually writes the word Auschwitz, referring to it only synecdochically as the “Tor von Oświęcim” or “das Tor.”43 She knows exactly what that gate symbolizes, however, even if her memories of that day are lacking, as she explains at the conclusion of this section. Here her normally grammatically meticulous and poetically controlled style gives way to a paragraph-long run-on sentence, in which the narrator reveals that she is so familiar with this place and this gate

41 Petrowskaja, 57.
42 Ibid., 58.
43 Ibid., 57; 58.
that the very word “Arbeit” is forever corrupted for her: “…ich weiß genau, was über dem Tor steht und dass ich deswegen die Arbeit so hasse, selbst das Wort, das sich niemals, mit keinem Geld oder Gedicht von diesem Spruch, von diesem Fluch, wird freikaufen können…”44 Visiting this memorial site in person, then, does nothing to afford the narrator insight or connection; rather it leaves her merely with an experience that was at best forgettable, and at worst traumatizing.

The other two memorial sites visited in the narrative—Babi Yar and Mauthausen—were undertaken, it is implied, with the aim of writing about them in mind. The narrator’s trip to Mauthausen in Austria comprises the final chapter of Vielleicht Esther and from its very beginning, it is riddled with condemnatory mnemonic stumbling blocks. Prior to the trip, the narrator calls the administrative office of Mauthausen visitor center from her home in Berlin. The woman who eventually answers the phone is curt, her response unhelpful. The narrator summarizes the impersonal interaction: “Ich bin die Kundin. Die Frau am anderen Ende ist die Leistung. Sie arbeitet, und ich bin die Empfängerin ihrer Arbeit.”45 Before her pilgrimage even commences, the narrator is reminded that while Mauthausen as a site represents personal, familial suffering and trauma for her, for many others the site is a quotidian and commercialized business. Her goal on this trip is to find her grandfather, or at least as much information about him as possible. “Ich suche meinen Großvater,” she writes, “Ich bin gekommen, um ihn abzuholen.”46 Yet when she arrives, she finds that his records housed in the camp museum are largely incorrect: “Auf der Mauthausener Registrierungskarte meines Großvaters Wassilij Owdijenko mit der Nummer 137 616 steht ‘Russ. Zivilist’ und nicht ‘Sowjet. Offizier’, als seine Ehefrau wird Natalia Hutorna genannt und nicht Rosalia Krzewina, und statt Kommunist steht ‘russ. orthodox‘. Nur die Adresse stimmt,

44 Ibid., 60.
46 Ibid., 247.
As her grandfather was notoriously silent after he returned to his family when the narrator was twelve and left no other material evidence from his life behind, the narrator’s only means of learning about him are whatever official records are stored away in the camp’s archives: “Nur seine Kriegsgefangenschaft war mir zugänglich.” Though her grandfather likely provided the false information during his internment at the camp in order to survive—his actual wife was Jewish—this inaccurate portrait is now the only account the narrator can access.

Her navigation of the physical site proves similarly lacking. The barracks that her grandfather once occupied are conspicuously clean and barren, a far cry from the fetid and overcrowded state they would have been in when her grandfather inhabited them: “Es müsste doch überall Dreck sein. Ich habe davon gelesen. Der Tod müsste stinken. Aber ich rieche nichts. Ich höre nichts. Ich sehe nur.” The concentration camp has been so renovated and revived that it no longer resembles anything akin to what her grandfather experienced. Rather than finding her grandfather at this memorial site, the narrator finds only false records and a gilded former prison. Such is the disconnect between the state of the concentration camp today and its state when actual prisoners occupied it that the narrator begins to attribute its former state to the prisoners themselves: “denn die Welt ist schön, nur die Häftlinge waren schmutzig und krank, unwürdig für das Leben, nur für die Arbeit geschaffen, die sie vernichten sollte.” Rather than furthering a connection with her grandfather or with the other victims of the camp, the narrator’s visit to the memorial site works towards the opposite end, with Mauthausen ultimately recreating a dehumanizing effect, as it was designed to during the war.

---

48 Ibid., 255.
49 Ibid., 247.
50 Ibid., 270.
While her trip to Mauthausen was the first and only time the narrator had set foot there, she has been to Babi Yar multiple times throughout her life, as it rests within the borders of her hometown. She would go there occasionally with her parents as a child, but, she explains, “ich wusste nur sehr vage, was für ein Ort das ist.” It is not until she is older that her parents explain to her that her grandparents, her great-grandmother, and her great-aunt rest somewhere in the expanse of the ravine. As she had visited Babi Yar as both a child and an adult, the narrator has seen the memorialization practices shift over time, from the days of Soviet control to those of an independent Ukraine. The sole monument placed by the Soviet Union at Babi Yar does not inspire much reverence or reflection in the narrator. She describes how it was dedicated “am falschen Ort und am falschen Tag” 35 years after the massacre at Babi Yar took place and goes on to describe the monument itself: “Muskulöse Sowjethelden—ein Matrose, ein Partisan und eine Ukrainerin—erobern die Vergangenheit.” This veneration of Soviet heroes epitomizes a historical function of the monument as cultural reification, demonstrating how “monuments have long sought to provide a naturalizing locus for memory, in which a state’s triumphs and martyrs, its ideals and founding myths are cast as naturally true as the landscape in which they stand.” The narrator bristles at the overwrought nationalism, but is more agitated at the monument’s omissions: “Die Wörter Heldentum, Mut, Vaterland, Kühnheit prallten von mir ab wie Pingpongbälle. Kein Wort davon, dass hier auch die Juden von Kiew liegen.”

---

51 Ibid., 187.  
52 Ibid.  
54 Petrowskaja, 187.
The array of monuments erected in the years after the collapse of the Soviet Union rectifies this exclusion; there is now not only a monument dedicated to the Jews murdered at Babi Yar, but monuments to all other victim groups as well: “ein Holzkreuz für die ukrainischen Nationalisten, ein Denkmal für die Ostarbeiter, eines für zwei Mitglieder des geistlichen Widerstands, eine Tafel für die Zigeuner.” The narrator finds this to be an overcorrection, however, explicitly comparing the segregation of these memorialized groups to the segregation associated with fascism and genocide: “Zehn Denkmäler, aber keine gemeinsame Erinnerung, sogar im Gedenken setzt die Selektion sich fort.” Rather than connecting or uniting people, the narrator finds that the Babi Yar monuments cause further fracture, recreating and preserving the social and political structures of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust—the same effect she charges archives, museums, and other memorial sites with. When discussing the Holocaust, the narrator points out, the word victim is often immediately associated with Jews, but, she argues, “viele meinen damit nur die anderen.”

The emphasis on victimhood is, to her, another way of creating false and detrimental separations between one set of people and another: “Das ist irreführend, den die, die da sterben mussten, waren nicht die anderen, sondern die Schulfreunde, die Kinder aus dem Hinterhof, die Nachbarn, die Omas und die Onkel, die biblischen Greise und ihre sowjetischen Enkel.” The narrator longs for a means of resisting the division and categorization that she sees in the strictly delineated victims groups of the Ukrainian monuments as well as in the protracted nationalism of the Soviet memorial. Looking at all the many plaques, crosses, and statues dedicated to various categories of victims, the narrator states, “Was mir fehlt, ist das Wort Mensch. Wem gehören diese Opfer? Sind

---

55 Ibid., 191.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid., 185.
58 Ibid.
Instead of emphasizing whichever aspect of their identity or politics led to their death at the hands of the Nazis, the narrator would prefer to highlight the victims’ shared humanity, with each person taking responsibility and forging a connection to all victims, regardless of ethnicity, nationality, or creed.

This desire to render the victims of Babi Yar as communally *ours* rather than as *orphans* fits with the narrator’s larger understanding of memory and victimhood. Describing Babi Yar, she writes, “denn ich glaube, dass es keine Fremden hier gibt, wenn es um Opfer geht. Jeder Mensch hat jemanden hier.” To the narrator, productive memorial practices must strive to overcome disconnection and forge a sense of belonging and kinship between those being memorialized and those witnessing the memorialization. Osborne acknowledges this as well, writing that “[t]he narrator’s encounters with the archive show her that she cannot draw neat distinctions between ‘victims’ and ‘perpetrators,’ or between her own family and those with whom she has no personal connection, but must take responsibility for this complex historical legacy.” Osborne is correct in identifying the archive as the catalyst that causes the narrator to come to this conclusion, but she does not identify the archive itself as the ultimate source of this problem. Indeed, in Petrowskaja’s book, all of the institutionalized memory spaces—the museum and the memorial site alongside the archive—are portrayed as relying on what John Bodnar calls the “dogmatic formalism” of official memory culture or “the restatement of reality in ideal rather than complex or ambiguous forms.”

Each of these spaces in *Vielleicht Esther* serves to recreate familiar power imbalances and divisions, rather than instantiating more complex notions of belonging and interconnection.

---

59 Ibid., 191.
60 Ibid., 184.
61 Osborne, 258.
Nowhere in the book is it intimated that there is an alternative where these memory spaces are concerned; as institutions, they are and will always be inextricably linked to power structures and the disjunctures they produce. To the narrator, there is no ideal monument or memorial that could be constructed at Babi Yar to rectify the problems she identifies with the monuments past and present. In fact, she writes, when it comes to Babi Yar, “dass es nichts mehr zu zeigen gibt, nur zu erzählen.”

Given this statement, it is perhaps unsurprising that rather than a physical monument, that which the narrator recognizes as having forged the greatest sense of belonging, connection, and understanding in relation to Babi Yar is a poem, published in 1961 by Yevgeny Yevtushenko. The poem, titled “Babiy Yar,” appeared in the Literaturnaya Gazeta, a leading Russian periodical and thematizes not only the Nazi massacre itself, but also the Soviet historical revisionism of the event and the continuing anti-Semitism of the Soviet Union. Petrowskaja includes the first seven lines of the poem, translated from their original Russian into German: “Über Babij Jar, da steht keinerlei Denkmal. / Ein schroffer Hang – der eine unbehaunte Grabstein. / Mir ist angst. / Ich bin alt heute, / so alt wie das jüdische Volk. / Ich glaube, ich bin jetzt / ein Jude.” As the poem was written before her birth, the narrator knows of its powerful impact largely from her mother, who recalls the flood of emotions she and other Russian Jews experienced upon its publication. Elated that their personal and painful misfortune had finally been brought out into the open, they called each up and cried tears of joy. To the narrator, this jubilation largely sprang from the willingness of a Russian poet to identify with the Jewish victims of Babi Yar; in stating the he is “jetzt ein Jude,” Yevtushenko closes the gap between the us and the them that the narrator finds so problematic in

---

63 Petrowskaja, 191.
64 Ibid., 189.

This recognition of and identification with the victims of Babi Yar does not end simply with this poem, however. The narrator describes how Yevtushenko’s composition was quickly translated into seven different languages, with Paul Celan penning the German version. Eventually it expanded beyond the limits of the written word, as Shostakovich set it to music as the first movement of his Thirteenth Symphony. Through translation and adaptation, Yevtushenko’s poem establishes a cultural network of memory, with nodes in different countries, languages, and mediums. Rather than being “Waisen unserer gescheiterten Erinnerung,” as the narrator describes the victims of Babi Yar during her visit to the memorial site, this poem and its wide intercultural reach creates relations and connections between the victims and others, rendering them, as the narrator puts it, “nicht mehr obdachlos.”

Such intercultural, interlingual, and intermedial networks appear repeatedly throughout Vielleicht Esther, suggesting a notion of memory, belonging, and identity that is based on affiliative and hybrid connection, rather than exclusionary and stagnant division.

**ii. Weaving Webs of Belonging**

Identity is often understood as something both internally consistent and necessarily excluding of other identities. Sociologist Rogers Brubaker and historian Frederick Cooper describe this familiar notion of identity as a “categorical code,” writing that “[t]he language of both politics and everyday life, to be sure, is rigorously categorical, dividing the population into mutually exclusive ethno-

---

65 Ibid., 190.
66 Ibid., 191; 190.
national categories, and making no allowances for mixed or ambiguous forms.”

This categoricalness is, to the narrator of Vielleicht Esther, inherently part of each institutionalized memory space she visits. In trying to present a palatable and easily comprehensible portrayal of history while also preserving unitary, hierarchical state power, the memorial site, the museum, and the archive all further a conventionally-bounded, either/or notion of identity. For the narrator, however, such strict and overtly pat conceptions of identity do not adequately allow for the complexity of her own cultural experiences. As a German Russian Ukrainian Jew, the narrator is easily part of the “mixed and ambiguous forms” Brubaker and Cooper write of. Despite their complexity, the narrator views her many cultural, national, and linguistic entanglements as something positive: “Ich dachte auf Russisch, suchte meine jüdische Verwandten und schrieb auf Deutsch. Ich hatte das Glück, mich in der Kluft der Sprachen, im Tausch, in der Verwechslung von Rollen und Blickwinkeln zu bewegen.” This notion of (inter)cultural complexity as a lucky and felicitous interchange of roles and perspectives stands in opposition to exclusionary notions of identity, and by extension, to the institutionalized memory spaces that dot the narrative landscape of Vielleicht Esther. Indeed, the narrator’s many ever-changing cultural attachments and associations would seem to be more in keeping with the more fluid notion of “belonging,” which, as Paul Jones and Michał Krzyżanowski explain, “does not necessarily need to be based on ‘objective,’ external sameness, but rather can be posited on a more fleeting solidarity” and “multiple attachments.” These various solidarities and attachments are woven together throughout Vielleicht Esther into webs and networks of belonging, which function as alternative,

---

grassroots memory spaces that stand in opposition to the institutionalized memory spaces that the
narrator and, by extension, Petrowskaja find such fault with.

A number of motifs that appear throughout the work foreground this concept of
interconnection and belonging. The book’s very organization, while proceeding loosely
chronologically through her family members from Simon Geller onward, does not present a
systematic genealogical lineage. Tales from the lives of various members of the narrator’s
mother’s extended family are interwoven among those from her father’s and it is often not
immediately clear how these characters are related to each other or even to the narrator.
Interspersed among these interlacing historical tales are the narrator’s personal memories and
accounts of her present-day mnemonic endeavors, which follow no chronology or order and are
arranged instead based on “spatial and associative principles.”\(^69\) Other, more tangible web-motifs
appear in the text as well. Trains appear repeatedly throughout the book, as the narrator travels
from site to site in search of information, understanding, and connection. The very opening scene
of Vielleicht Esther takes place in the Berlin Hauptbahnhof, described by the narrator as a
“Durchgangsbahnhof, der für keinen Zug Endstation ist, keine Sorge, man fährt immer weiter.”\(^70\)
Augmenting the inherent interconnection and dynamism that the narrator perceives in the train
station, she encounters a man on the platform who reveals himself to be an Iranian Jew living in
New York. Like the narrator, a portion of his ancestors came from Poland, prompting him to come
to Europe with his wife in search of any lingering traces. This single scene forges a network
between all these cultural nodes, connecting Iran to New York to Germany to Poland and, through
the narrator, to Russia and Ukraine.

\(^{69}\) Wanner, 312.
\(^{70}\) Petrowskaja, 8.
Textiles and weaving play a metaphorical role in Petrowskaja’s work as well, with explicit references to “gehäkelte und gewebte Spitzen,” “verfilzte Wolle,” and the mythological “gedrehter, unzerreißbarer Ariadnepfad.” The narrator visits the Polish city of Kalisz, where her great-grandfather lived towards the end of the nineteenth century, and describes the city’s chief economic enterprise at that time: “Überall wurde gewebt und genäht, die Stadt war voll mit kleinen und größeren Fabriken, den Kalisz versorgte ganz Russland mit Spitzen […] ich suchte nach meinen Krzewins, und auch sie waren aus einem Gewebe enstanden.” The textiles woven in this city a century earlier are here explicitly connected to the narrator’s relatives, advancing, as with Petrowskaja’s associative narrative structure, a notion of family that, as Lizarazu describes it, is “at odds with traditional genealogical metaphors and trajectories. The ‘Gewebe’ relies on flatness, synchrony, and horizontal expansion rather than the logic of provenance, temporal depth, and succession that is associated with the vertical axis of genealogy.” Even historical events, something nearly always associated with linearity and chronology, are seen by the narrator as mere swaths of fabric that she may stitch together in whichever fashion she wishes: “alles Stoffe, Stoffe. Man kann schon viel daraus nähen. Historische Stoffe sind für mich Samt, Atlas, Crépe de Chine oder, wie wir damals auf Russisch sagten, krepdyschin.”

Beyond train systems and textiles, a further Gewebe that appears in Vielleicht Esther is the preeminent web of the twenty-first century: the internet. Though the narrator physically travels through Ukraine, Poland, Germany, and Austria, an equally essential part of her search and research is virtual. It is via Facebook, for instance, that a childhood neighbor of the narrator’s

---

71 Ibid., 62.
72 Ibid., 129.
73 Lizarazu, 180.
74 Petrowskaja, 264.
mother, originally from Kyiv but now living in Jerusalem, is able to track down and eventually contact the narrator’s family.\textsuperscript{75} Similarly, it is through an internet search of Yad Vashem’s death records and a subsequent Google search that the narrator learns of a distant relative of hers. The relative, Mira Kimmelman, is a Holocaust survivor related to the narrator by marriage. Born in Germany, she and her father—the only other surviving member of her immediate family—immigrated to Oak Ridge, Tennessee after the war, where Mira would write a memoir, \textit{Life Beyond the Holocaust}. Upon discovering Mira’s existence, the narrator finds a way to contact her via email, arranges a time to speak by telephone, and orders a copy of Mira’s book through Amazon UK.\textsuperscript{76} In contrast to the institutionalized memory spaces that the narrator visits, which point only backwards in time, the internet functions as a space in which the gap between the past and present is more easily closed. With the click of a mouse and the tap of keys, the narrator finds herself communicating with distant relatives about bygone eras. And whereas the archive, the museum, and the memorial site are all mired in hierarchical political power structures, the internet provides the narrator with what Ananda Mitra calls “hypertextual decentering,” in which the process of constant movement across texts via links results in a “lack of a unanimous center,” “a questioning of the traditional centers of author-ity, and the dilution of the hierarchies of discursive power.”\textsuperscript{77} Through this virtual web, the narrator is able to engage with family, memory, and belonging on her own terms, bridging the divisions of nation and language, and establishing a system of interconnections.

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 84.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 118-122.
Language itself functions as a web as well in Vielleicht Esther. As Petrowskaja is writing in her second language, Russian words and phrases occasionally slip into her German, either Latinized or in their original Cyrillic.78 Yiddish, Ukrainian, and Polish—languages spoken by various ancestors—appear as well, and utterances in the lingua franca of English are in wide abundance. So appreciable is the multilingualism of the book that Michaelis-König describes Petrowskaja’s approach to languages as “an exercise in hybridity.”79 Both his chapter and Gabriele Eckart’s article work to disentangle the many languages from each other and to identify the discrete function of individual languages in Petrowskaja’s book. Eckart examines the role of Russian specifically, while Michaelis-König separates German from Russian from Greek.80 Emotional trauma and cultural rupture are at the fore of Eckart’s argument, when she claims that in Vielleicht Esther, “linguistic shifts help to contend with heartbreak over conspicuously missing branches of the family tree,” and that the alteration between German and Russian “shows that her mind is suspended between this nostalgia [for Russia] and her enthusiasm for her new home in Germany.”81 Little by way of heartbreak, nostalgia, or enthusiasm are present in Petrowskaja’s work, however. While the narrator is emotionally expressive, she does not display overt sorrow or grief at the gaps in her family history, nor does she appear particularly sentimental about her childhood in the no longer existent Soviet Union.

---

79 Michaelis-König, 150.
80 Greek does not appear as a language in the book at all, but Michaelis-König derives his interpretation from the narrator’s frequent allusions to Greek myth.
81 Eckart, 139; 143.
Michaelis-König’s understanding of the function of various languages in the book is more complex than Eckart’s and more obviously rooted in the text. He describes the peculiar role of German in the narrator’s life: “In Petrowskaja, German figures as the language of a murderous occupying force in the past, yet in the present it grants the narrator a new freedom of expression and allows for a re-interpretation of the constellation of languages and cultures in German Jewish writing.” Indeed, the narrator has almost entirely positive associations with the German language. Even its role as “language of murderous occupying force” is portrayed positively: “Oft verbiss ich mich in die Sprache, mit dem Recht der Besatzungsmacht, ich wollte diese Macht, als müsste ich die Festung stürmen.” To the narrator, German represents power, but this is not merely political or military power. In learning German, the narrator gains the power to distance herself from difficult national, ethnic, or family history, affording her the chance to view her own position in these collective groups anew: “Mein Deutsch, Wahrheit und Täuschung, die Sprache des Feindes, war ein Ausweg, ein zweites Leben, eine Liebe, die nicht vergeht, weil man sie nie erreicht, Gabe und Gift, als hätte ich ein Vöglein freigelassen.” There is only one moment in the book in which the narrator worries her connection to German and Germany might be an impediment: when she first contacts Mira Kimmelman, the distant relative in Oak Ridge, Tennessee who survived the Holocaust, the narrator frets that her Berlin address might aggrieve Mira. She is then surprised when Mira asks her if she would rather speak English or German. When their telephone call finally takes place, the narrator is amazed to hear her adopted language from a relative: “Sie sprach nicht nur besser Hochdeutsch als ich, es war Vorkriegsdeutsch, langsam und gepflegt […] Kein Hauch

82 Michaelis-König, 154.
83 Petrowskaja, 80.
84 Ibid.
von Jiddisch, kein polnischer Akzent. Deutsch war Miras Muttersprache.”85 In defiance of her expectations, German becomes a source of connection for the narrator to her Jewish heritage.

Yet despite the preponderance of languages and the importance of German in particular in this story collection, separating these various tongues into distinct categories of meaning as Eckart and Michaelis-König do seems to stand in opposition to the overarching role of language in Vielleicht Esther. Far more significant than any single purpose they may serve in isolation is the interconnection and exchange between the various languages scattered throughout Petrowskaja’s work. It is precisely this ability to express herself in multiple linguistic modes that expands the narrator’s emotional and cultural bandwidth enough to confront and tell the stories contained in the volume. At one point, the narrator insinuates that this is true for her father as well. In order to satisfy his wide literary tastes and curiosity, her father often read books in Polish when they had not been translated into Russian or, in some cases, when the Russian original was inaccessible. The Polish-language works affected him greatly; the narrator writes that they “schmerzte ihn, als dürfte er das Eigene nur im Schmerz der anderen erkennen, in einer Art Übersetzung.”86 Similar to the manner in which German functions for the narrator, Polish becomes an outlet for her father, an emotional loophole that enables him to access a part of himself that in Russian might have been lost or invisible.

This understanding of words and languages as nodes in a complex, interrelated system of meaning-making can be further seen in the wordplay that occurs frequently throughout the book. When discussing the Lubyanka prison, the narrator notes that in Russian this agency was always referred to as Organy, prompting her to formulate a vast metaphoric image of human anatomy:

85 Ibid., 123.
86 Ibid., 93.
“riesige dunkle Eingeweide, in denen manche Menschen arbeiten, und wenn man dort eintritt, wird man bei lebendigen Leib verdaut, den das ist die Funktion der Organe.”

It is through this pun-based image that the narrator is able to capture and express the great fear she feels at the idea of this building and agency. Elsewhere, the term concentration camp leads to a meditation on mental concentration and memory, and a search for her relatives surnamed Stern in the Gelbe Seiten telephone book becomes a search for Gelbe Sterne, a reference to both the name of the family members in question and to the yellow stars of the Holocaust. When telling a story that prominently features a ficus, the narrator states, “Ich war auf den Fikus fixiert, ich war fikussiert.”

In Vielleicht Esther, words are constantly related and equated to one another; as Wanner puts it, they “come with their own mental and associative baggage.” Notably, this baggage is not always—or even often—based on logical or pronounced connections, but often on loose, homophonous or etymologic associations.

Names are particularly susceptible to such linguistic transposition. Her great-grandfather Ozjel’s name becomes both Asilij, derived, in the narrator’s mind, from the patronymic of her grandmother, Rosalia Asilijewna, and Asyl: “Als ich älter wurde, dachte ich über diesen seltsam klingenden Urgroßvater nach, seinen Namen, der mir zugleich Herkunft und Herberge bot, Asilij, und sein Asyl, das Schutz gab.” Though her uncle Wil’s name was created from the initials of Wladimir Iljitsch Lenin, the narrator detects in it a trace of the Yiddish word Wille, which makes sense to her, as “in der Tat war niemand in unserer Familie so zielstrebig wie Wil.”

87 Ibid, 149.
88 Ibid., 59; 28.
89 Ibid., 219.
90 Wanner, 312.
91 Petrowskaja, 94.
92 Ibid., 36.
surname is broken down into its Greek root \( \pi\epsilon\tau\rho\ος \) (petros), meaning stone, while Babi Yar becomes both “Weiberschlucht,” its literal Russian translation, and “Baby Jahr,” its German homophone.\(^93\) The Polish city Kalisz is similarly dissected into its Celtic root, “Quelle oder Ursprung” and its Slavic counterpart, “Sumpf und Moor.”\(^94\) In Petrowskaja’s writing, a single name can blossom into its own web of associative meanings, presaging a character’s complex identity, background, and allegiances through the intricacy of this linguistic network. In some instances, names become a bridge not only to an array of root meanings and aural likenesses, but to other narratives, texts, genres, or historical figures as well. The Russian diminutive of her materal great-uncle Abram’s name is related to a series of Ashkenazi jokes about the foolish Abrascha, for instance, and the name of her husband Tobias conjures up references to Haydn’s oratorio \textit{Il Ritorno di Tobia}, Sholem Aleichem’s stories \textit{Tewje, der Milchmann}, and their musical adaptation, \textit{Fiddler on the Roof}.\(^95\) Judas Stern, the narrator’s paternal great-uncle and alleged assassin, bears the name that generates the greatest number of associations, from the more obvious “jüdischer Stern” to Russian fairytales to Bulgakov’s \textit{The Master and the Margarita} and from there to German folklore’s Mephisto (see fig. 1).\(^96\) The relationship between the various references put forward by the narrator is tenuous and subjective, something the narrator tacitly acknowledges when she quotes her father: “Du machst aber kühne Vergleiche.”\(^97\) Yet however bold or audacious

\(^{93}\) Ibid., 142; 183.  
\(^{94}\) Ibid., 128.  
\(^{95}\) Ibid., 205; 107.  
\(^{96}\) Ibid., 156-157.  
\(^{97}\) Ibid., 157.
the narrator’s comparisons may be, they serve to connect German to Russian to Jewish culture, thereby constructing a web of belonging that mirrors her own complex experience.

iii. Intertexts in Context

That texts (the New Testament, The Master and the Margarita, the Faust legend, fairy tales) as well as progenitors of texts (Yehuda Halevi and Yehuda Amichai) constitute so many nodes on the associative network derived from Judas Stern is neither coincidence nor anomaly. While there are many webs, networks, and systems that appear throughout Vielleicht Esther—trains, textiles and weaving, the internet, and languages—perhaps the most extensive Gewebe that underlies Petrowskaja’s book is that of literature and texts. Intertexts stemming from canonical literature and poetry, religious mythology, fairy tales, and pop culture dot the pages of the story collection. Some appear as epigraphs at the beginning of new subsections and others appear intradiegetically,
when the characters encounter texts within the world of the narrative, from the reports the narrator unearths in archives to books such as Die Geschichte des Ostjudentums that she consults in her research to a Thomas Bernhard novel she reads on a plane.\textsuperscript{98} The vast majority of intertexts, however, appear as allusions and analogies in the narration, when the narrator compares a facet of her life or her familial past to an aspect from literature or other texts. Her grandmother, she writes, waited for her husband to return from the war “länger als Penelope,” and the gait of the titular “Vielleicht Esther” is described as “wie die Schildkröte aus den Aporien von Zenon.”\textsuperscript{99} Elsewhere, she compares her attempts to recall her grandfather’s garden to “Alice im Wunderland mit ihrem Ich möchte in den Garten!”\textsuperscript{100} The cultural library from which the narrator draws these references is populated by a wide array of texts; Russian poetry, German fairy tales, Torah stories, Don Quixote, and The Little Prince are all present, along with many others.

Images of networks or webs would seem to inhere in the very concept of intertextuality, as they appear from its earliest iterations through more recent scholarship on the topic. Bakhtin—whose work inspired Julia Kristeva to first coin the term \textit{intertextuality}—refers to literature as a “system of languages that mutually and ideologically interanimate each other.”\textsuperscript{101} Employing a more artistic metaphor, Kristeva herself writes that “any text is a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another,” while Foucault describes any book as “caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a

\textsuperscript{98} Ibid., 54; 245. 
\textsuperscript{99} Ibid., 19; 239. 
network.” What is perhaps the most pronounced Gewebe metaphor for intertextuality, however, can be found in Barthes’s *The Pleasure of the Text*:

> Text means tissue; but whereas hitherto we have always taken this tissue as a product, a ready-made veil, behind which lies, more or less hidden, meaning (truth), we are now emphasizing, in the tissue, the generative idea that the text is made, is worked out in perpetual interweaving; lost in this tissue—this texture—the subject unmakes himself, like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of its web.

In this conception, the text is rendered as a spider’s web with other texts and cultural objects comprising its interlacing threads. Notably, though, in Barthes’s metaphor the apparent creator of these threads—the spider—is inconsequential, vanished by the very threads it produces and weaves together. To anyone familiar with Barthes, this will come as no great surprise; his “Death of the Author” had already diminished the importance of a text’s architect six years before *The Pleasure of the Text* was published. While the overall essay serves as an argument and plea for the literary establishment to loose themselves from the traditional practice of viewing an author’s biography and intentions as the skeleton key to unlock its interpretation, the language Barthes employs in “Death of the Author” mirrors that of his later book. “The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centres of culture. [The author’s] only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as to never rest on any of them.” Again, text and tissue are related and again, the subjectivity and agency of the author is delegitimized.

In Barthes’s conception of texts and intertexts, the writing subject does not forge the relationships among various works of literature or culture, but merely stumbles upon their inherent, preexisting

---

similarities and connections. By privileging the web over the weaver, the author becomes not an individual subject with a fixed or stable identity, but a nebulous being suspended in a perpetual moment of fabrication.

Feminist literary scholar Nancy K. Miller problematizes Barthes’s conception, in which, she argues, “the subject is self-consciously erased by a model of text production which acts to foreclose the question of agency itself.”\(^{105}\) While she is sanguine towards the overall “Death of the Author,” she sees Barthes’s erasure of authorial subjectivity as particularly troubling when considering the “the interwoven structures of power, gender, and identity” that are involved in the writing process.\(^{106}\) As women have traditionally been erased or ignored by the Western canon and literary establishment, Miller contends, a movement to minimize the role of the author can too easily become an occlusion of gendered subjectivities. Nowhere does Miller plead for a reinstatement of the power of authorial intention—in fact, she expresses great support for “the discussions around patriarchal texts that move to dismantle the originating powers of authorship”—but Miller does advocate for a mode of textual interpretation that “recover[s] within representation the emblems of its construction.”\(^{107}\) In other words, while the author’s intentions and biography should in no way be the divining rod guiding interpretation, traces of an author’s identity and subjectivity are nonetheless woven into the text, and to deny or ignore this is to erase non-hegemonic identities and subjectivities.

The numerous instances of intertextuality in Petrowskaja’s book benefit from both Barthes’s and Miller’s interpretations of the literary device. In contrast to the hierarchical politics

---


\(^{106}\) Ibid., 81.

\(^{107}\) Ibid., 97; 80.
of exclusion that the narrator sees promoted in institutionalized memory spaces, the web of intertextuality woven throughout Vielleicht Esther can be viewed as putting forward a conception of identity which harbors “not only multiple attachments (to more than one nation, to more than one cause) but also to sometimes (seemingly) mutually exclusive belongings.”¹⁰⁸ The wide range of textual allusions and citations within the pages of Petrowskaja’s book establish a literary—and therefore cultural—allegiance to identities that have historically been viewed as incompatible. If we take each of the texts referenced in the course of the book as nodes in a network of belonging, the narrator becomes simultaneously German and Jewish, Russian and European, Ukrainian and Soviet. Weaving the voices of Homer, Goethe, Turgenev, Gertrude Stein, and the Russian rock band Akvarium into one text is intrinsically heteroglossic; Petrowskaja’s intertextuality becomes, in the words of Graham Allen, the “embodiment of otherness” that “is against, beyond, and resistant to (mono)logic.”¹⁰⁹ To Allen, intertextuality is not an innocent literary happenstance, but a device with an underlying sociopolitical importance: “Such language is disruptive, revolutionary even. Intertextuality encompasses that aspect of literary and other kinds of texts which struggles against and subverts reason, the belief in unity of meaning or of the human subject, and which is therefore subversive to all ideas of the logical and the unquestionable.”¹¹⁰ Whereas the archive, the museum, and the memorial site recreate the oppressive power structures of history and encourage identification with neatly divided groups, the intertextuality in Vielleicht Esther subverts these overly rigid models of identity, rendering literature and all its complex interrelations as space in which various memories and identities can exist simultaneously and coequally.

¹⁰⁸ Paul Jones and Michal Krzyżanowski, 48.
¹¹⁰ Ibid., 44-45.
Yet Miller’s contention that the interpretive unraveling of any web must take into consideration the spider that wove it is also pertinent to the intertextuality in Petrowskaja’s book. Rather than dissolving the author-cum-narrator’s subjectivity, agency, or identity, as Barthes suggests, the intricate network of textual references and allusions in _Vielleicht Esther_ are used to define the bounds of her belonging. As she blends Russian, German, Jewish, Greek, and other texts in the course of the story collection, the narrator demonstrates a sense of belonging and affiliation with each of these cultures, thus knitting together a multicultural, multilingual, and polyphonic fabric of identity. It is notable that, with the exception of one American film and two American filmmakers, none of the intertexts that appear in the book originate outside of Europe. Equally notable is that the cultures from which the greatest number of intertextual references originate are Classical Greek (18 instances), Jewish (18), Russian (13), and German (12). With Greek representing as Michaelis-König argues, “the root culture of Europe,” these four clusters of intertexts constitute the four main cultural affiliations the narrator wishes to establish and/or maintain.

Aside from the aforementioned Bulgakov novel and song by Akvarium, all of the other Russian references are to fairy tales or poetry. The fairy tale intertexts are introduced via comparisons to stock characters or tropes: “sah Wil in der Tat aus wie der wackere Iwan aus dem Märchen;” “der Stern strahlt auf der Stirn, wie bei der Schönen im russischen Märchen;” “Als ich erwachte, war alles schon fertig, wie in den Märchen von der weisen Wassilissa.” The half dozen allusions to Russian poetry span two centuries of literary movements, from the romanticism and realism of mid-1800s to turn-of-the-century Russian symbolism to more recent twentieth-century

---

111 See the appendix for an overview of the book’s intertexts.
112 Michaelis-König, 157.
113 Petrowskaja, 36; 157; 245.
acmeism and Soviet Realism. Both Michaelis-König and Eckart have theorized as to the role of Russian in Petrowskaja’s book. While they focus largely on the language itself, both also touch on the Russian intertexts, with Michaelis-König arguing that references to Russian literature are a way for the narrator “to be proud of her Russian communist culture” and to “touch[] on some of the core aspects of her Soviet-influenced worldview.” Focusing less on the political aspects of Russian culture and more on the narrator’s emotional relationship to memory and history, Eckart states that “[t]hese references reveal how the story of the narrator’s search for her dead relatives, a quest that fills her with fear, is written over older texts—a poem by Lermontov, a Russian idiom, and a fairy tale—all of which resonate with each other in Petrowskaja’s German-language narrative.” As with their previously discussed endeavors to disentangle the various languages present in Vielleicht Esther from one another, Michaelis-König’s and Eckart’s arguments regarding the role of Russian intertexts do not take into account the translations and intersections that exist between Russian intertexts and those from other cultures.

The very appearance of Russian intertextual references in a German-language work would suggest that there is a certain degree of cultural transmission taking place, but the narrator makes this explicit at various points in Vielleicht Esther when she transposes a certain text from one culture to another. In a subsection of the chapter that focuses on Judas Stern’s arrest and trial, the narrator explains that the 1932 assassination attempt he was charged with and eventually executed for took place in the same year as the “Goethejubiläum,” the hundred-year anniversary of the celebrated writer’s death. The Soviet Union, the narrator writes, was obsessed with Goethe at the time and “Goethefeiern, Goethelesungen, Goethewettbewerben” took place throughout the land.

---

114 Michaelis-König, 156; 155.
115 Eckart, 146.
116 Petrowskaja, 155.
With no formal preface, the narrator launches into a line of Goethe’s poetry, writing: “Warte nur, balde ruhest du auch schwebte über dem Land, Goethes Worte aus einem der berühmtesten russischen Lieder, in der Übersetzung von Lermontow.” Here one intertext, the second part of Goethe’s *Wandrers Nachtlied*, fades seamlessly into a second, the renowned romantic Mikhail Lermontov’s Russian translation of the same poem. Arguably, a third implied intertext is also present: Lermontov’s translation gained even greater prominence after composer Alexander Varlamov set it to music in the mid-nineteenth century. This easy passage from German culture to Russian suggests a degree of cultural congruence and fluidity, demonstrating as well the inherent interconnection between the German and Russian aspects of the narrator’s identity.

Later in the book, the same cultural transition between German and Russian occurs again, but this time in the opposite direction. As the narrator traces the route of her Ukrainian grandfather’s 55-mile death march from Mauthausen to the town of Gunskirchen, she describes her physical movement in lyrical terms: “Ich gehe zu Fuß, gemessen Schrittes, wie man Gedichte schreibt, einem inneren Rhythmus folgend, denn alle russischen Gedichte über den Weg sind in fünfhebigen Trochäen geschrieben, Vy-cho-shu-o-din-ja-na-do-ro-gu.” The trochees quoted in this sentence constitute the opening lines of Lermontov’s poem of the same name, translated in English as “I go out on the road alone.” Directly after the introduction of this Russian intertext the narrator provides Rainer Maria Rilke’s German translation: “Einsam geh’ ich auf dem Weg.” Neither Lermontov nor Rilke are identified by name, however. According to Adrian Wanner, such attributions are not necessary: “These poets, as it were, have become an integral part of the fabric of Petrowskaja’s own Russian-German lyric consciousness and therefore need no

---

117 Ibid.
118 Ibid., 243.
119 Ibid.
Petrowskaja’s familiarity with Lermontov is unsurprising; she holds a PhD in Slavic literature from the Russian State University for the Humanities in Moscow. Rather, it is the unacknowledged transposition of the poem from the words of an acclaimed Russian writer to those of an acclaimed German writer that is significant. Not only is the narrator well-versed in Russian poetry, she is able to transfer this knowledge into her adopted German culture.

In a final example of the bridge Petrowskaja erects between the culture of her childhood and that of her adult life, the narrator discusses the importance of the Russian language to her family: “das Russische war das stolze Erbe aller, die wussten, was Verzweiflung ist, angesichts des Schicksals der eigenen Heimat, wie der Dichter sagt, Nur du gibst mir Stütze und Halt, o du große, mächtige, wahrheitsgetreue und freie russische Sprache.” Again the author is unnamed; in this case, it is a line from an 1882 prose poem by Ivan Turgenev. Rather than citing some famous German translation, the narrator continues, “und heute höre ich in diesen Worten o du fröhliche, o du selige.” As she relates Turgenev’s poem to a German Christmas carol, the continuum between Russian and German culture is in this instance established not by literal translation, but by the same homophonic similarity that causes the narrator to relate Ozjel to Asyl or Fikus to fixieren. With whatever slight similarity serving as a catalyzing factor, the narrator weaves Russian and German cultural texts together, creating a web of belonging that includes both of these identities simultaneously.

Intertextuality in Vielleicht Esther does not merely intertwine Russian and German cultures, however. The array of texts the narrator alludes to extends beyond these two nationalities to create a web of European literature and, in so doing, European culture. In his dissection of the

---

120 Wanner, 313.
121 Petrowskaja, 78.
122 Ibid.
multilingualism in Petrowskaja’s book, Michaelis-König argues that the many references to Greek mythology serve as a “missing link” between cultures: “As the root culture of Europe, it comes into play where Russian and German as the languages of violence and power become unacceptable.”

Unlike the nationally, ethnically, and linguistically bound cultures of Russia and Germany, Greek mythology in Michaelis-König’s understanding is unencumbered by history and politics, functioning as a neutral, transnational signifier of Europeanness per se. As such, it is capable of connecting seemingly elusive or mutually exclusive cultures: “it serves as a source for transcultural symbols and tropes that connect what otherwise would remain disparate and unresolved.”

Yet, as her seamless transitions between German and Russian intertexts demonstrate, the narrator of Vielleicht Esther has little trouble forging connections between the two cultures. Rather, the Greek mythology so prevalent throughout the book constitutes yet another node in Petrowskaja’s network of belonging, giving a general, integrated European identity the same weight as her more particular Russian and German identities. As with her transitions between Russian and Greek intertexts, the narrator shifts easily between Greek myth and texts from other cultures.

When recounting her childhood experience of listening to her mother read the story of Achilles, the narrator slips into references to Russian language and culture. Achilles’s mother bathing him in the river but neglecting his ankle fills the young narrator with fear, as she writes, “Ich erinnere mich daran, wie mich an dieser Stelle die Angst jedesmal so packte, dass meine Seele in die Fersen rutschte, wie man auf Russisch sagt, wenn man von Furcht ergriffen wird.” Here it is not only the narrator’s fright that prompts this Russian idiom, but also the subject matter. In both

---

124 Ibid.
cases, ankles are related to fear and foreboding, an implicitly articulated connection between Russian culture and Greek myth. This becomes more explicit later in the same paragraph, when the narrator compares Achilles to a character from Russian fairy tales: “Ich dachte auch an den bösen Zauberer aus dem Märchen, Кощей Бессмертный, Kotschej Bessmertnyj, Kotschej der Unsterbliche, der zwar sterblich war, doch hockte sein Tod in der Nadelpitze, die Nadel im Ei, das Ei in der Ente, die Ente wohnte auf der Eiche und die Eiche wuchs auf einer Insel, von der niemand wusste, wo sie ist.” Not only does the narrator point out a common trope between the two figures, thereby associating Russian folklore and Greek myth, she also provides his name in triplicate, starting from the Cyrillic Russian and then progressing through Latinized Russian to translated German, visually shifting between the two languages and cultures.

Eckart contends that in her use of the Russian language and references to Russian texts, Petrowskaja “is testing whether Eastern European languages and literatures could not also be included in [the reservoir of Western literature],” but the narrator expresses no uncertainty in this regard. To her, Russian and other Eastern European cultures are inherently part of the same cultural web as Greek mythology and German literature. Through the incorporation of other European intertexts whose influence extends beyond national or linguistic bounds—*Don Quixote* (30), Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (68), Darwin’s *Origin of the Species* (68), *The Little Prince* (234), *Alice in Wonderland* (239), the legend of Tristan and Isolde (259)—the narrator weaves a rich web of culture that spans the entire continent, a web that includes her native and adopted countries, but extends far beyond as well. The intertextual knots of this web are often used by the narrator to interpret and make sense of her own experiences or those of her family members. She explains her first youthful comprehension of human mortality with the help of Cervantes: “Die Erkenntnis, dass die Menschen gingen, traf mich unvorbereitet, legte sich über mich wie ein Schatten, bedeckte
mich wie das Becken, das sich Don Quichotte irgendwann auf seinen Kopf gesetzt hatte.”¹²⁵ Later, the narrator describes her Jewish family’s predilection for books and education, which she contrasts with Ukrainian culture’s privileging of agriculture, nature, and land-ownership. This desire for a sense of belonging in Ukraine is articulated by reference to one of the most translated European texts of all time: “Vielleicht spürte ich die Trägheit meines Agrarlands, zu dem man nur dann gehörte, wenn man ein Stück Erde hatte. Mir hätte eine Rose auf einem kleinen Planeten gereicht, ich hätte für sie gesorgt, ich hätte für sie auf Schlaf verzichtet, und ich hätte nur für sie geatmet, wie der kleine Prinz.”¹²⁶

While the texts the narrator uses to interpret and contextualize her life stem from a number of European countries and cultures, stories and figures from Greek myth do appear with great frequency. The slow but steady gait of the titular Vielleicht Esther as she makes her way to the place all Kyivan Jews have been ordered to gather is described as “wie die Schildkröte aus den Aporien von Zenon” that could not be outpaced even by “der schnellfüßige Achilles.”¹²⁷ The narrator finds a photograph of Judas Stern and interprets the fearful and unsettling expression on his face as something mythological: “als wüsste er um seine Zukunft, als würde sich diese Zukunft in seinen mit Furcht und Verwirrung angefüllten Augen spiegeln, als hätte er die Gorgo Medusa gesehen.”¹²⁸ At one point, the narrator uses a mythological character to understand the experiences, actions, and emotions of both her ancestors and herself. In the middle of the chapter detailing her trip to Mauthausen, the narrator tells the story of Sisyphus, who wanted to cheat death and was punished by Thanatos, condemned to the perpetually repeating task of rolling a heavy boulder up

¹²⁵ Petrowskaja, 30.
¹²⁶ Ibid., 234.
¹²⁷ Ibid., 212.
¹²⁸ Ibid., 159.
a hill only for it to roll down once it nears the top. The similarity of Sisyphus’s never-ending burden and the forced labor of the Mauthausen prisoners is implied in the next paragraph, when the narrator describes the nature of their work: “wieder und wieder trugen sie Steine nach oben, Schritt für Schritt einander folgend.”\textsuperscript{129} This perceived parallel is made explicit at the end of the paragraph, when the narrator surmises, “Es gab hier auch Dichter, vielleicht haben sie den Tod betrügen wollen und wurden nun dafür bestraft.”\textsuperscript{130}

This speculation presents a curious deviation from the story in question: in Greek mythology, Sisyphus was no \textit{Dichter}, but a king. Rather, the term \textit{Dichter} refers not to a mythological figure, but to the narrator herself, who regards her writerly task as Sisyphian: “ich wollte mich erinnern und darüber schreiben, es war aber eine Tätigkeit ohne absehbares Ende.”\textsuperscript{131} Writing here becomes tantamount to Sisyphus’s mythical crime; in telling the stories of her deceased family members, the narrator is herself cheating death, dissolving the border between present and past, living and dead. Literature in this understanding is capable of interconnecting disparate people and events, of forging affiliation and belonging along unconventional axes. The story of Sisyphus becomes a link that connects the narrator not only to her grandfather, but to all those who were imprisoned in the Mauthausen concentration camp. The unending, unfinishable labor the prisoners were tasked with is related to the unending, unfinishable labor of narrating such atrocities. As the narrator begins her walk through Mauthausen, she describes it with, “[ich] fing an, meinen Stein hinaufzuwälzen.”\textsuperscript{132} Shortly thereafter, she realizes the full weight and impossibility of the task she has set herself: “ich konnte nichts erzählen, auch nicht, dass das

\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., 270.
\textsuperscript{130} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 269.
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., 270.
Gelingen einem Menschen hier nicht gestattet ist. Es ergab keine Summe und keinen Sinn. Warum lassen wir den Stein nicht liegen?“

Unnerved by the irrationality and futility of the prisoners’ fates, the narrator finds it in turn irrational and futile to attempt to tell the specific story of this place and its history. Instead she turns to other texts, other stories, allowing them to make sense of what in and of itself seems so senseless. The myth of Sisyphus not only serves as a bridge connecting the narrator to her grandfather and his fellow internees, it also provides a script for her to follow. Reading her experiences and those of her grandfather as different renderings of the Sisyphus myth enables her to imbue seemingly meaningless events and efforts with meaning, as well as to place them in a line of European cultural continuity.

iv. Reading Jewishness Intertextually

Greek mythology is, however, only one of the two primary sources in Petrowskaja’s book that provides such a model of cultural continuity and meaning-making. As Michaelis-König establishes, references to ancient Greek myth and culture constitute great many of the intertextual allusions in Vielleicht Esther, but Jewish stories and texts form an equally large contingent. Mirroring the usage of Greek myth in the book, the narrator employs stories from the Torah and Talmud to make sense of her lives and the lives of her relatives. This practice stands in sharp contrast to her common, but less frequent references to Russian and German cultures, which appear most often as single quoted lines of poetry or fleeting citations of titles and characters. Just as the myth of Sisyphus proves the base text for the narrator’s reading of her grandfather’s imprisonment and the story of Achilles that for her reading of Vielleicht Esther’s trek towards her impending death, the story of Genesis is used to interpret and understand an experience from the narrator’s

133 Ibid.
adolescence and a suspicion about her grandfather’s past. When her Ukrainian grandfather returns from his unexplained forty-year absence, he introduces into the young narrator’s life his garden, quelling for the most part her childhood yearning for a piece of land her Jewish family could call their own. But, as she explains, before her grandfather’s homecoming and reestablishment of his garden, the narrator had found her own interim solution: “Ich hatte bereits ein Paradies, meinen Garten Eden im Zentrum der Großstadt.”\textsuperscript{134} The Garden of Eden in question was located in Kyiv, outside an old palace that stood on a hill near the narrator’s childhood home. Having been converted into a center for arts and culture in the Soviet era, the palace was visited by the narrator six days a week during her childhood for dance and singing lessons, after which she would wander about the gardens, studying the flowers and eating apples picked from a “Paradiesapfelbaum.”\textsuperscript{135}

This setting loses its blissful sheen, however, when the teenaged narrator learns that in the 1930s, the palace was used as the central \textit{Folterkammer} of the NKVD: “Tausende wurden hier erschossen.”\textsuperscript{136} Upon learning this, the paradisal quality of the garden disappears; to the narrator, it is now a place “durchnässt mit karminroter Farbe, gedüngt mit bitteren Paradiesäpfelchen.”\textsuperscript{137} Taking the biblical analogy further, when the narrator is informed by a historian that all executions at the palace took place on the other side of the hill from her childhood Garden of Eden, she clarifies the flimsiness of this historical loophole with “als wären dadurch meine Äpfel rein und unbefleckt geblieben und ich vom Sündenfall verschont.”\textsuperscript{138} As her use of the subjunctive indicates, neither the narrator nor anyone else can ignore or evade the transgressions of the past; as in the biblical tale of Adam and Eve, the sins of one generation have consequences that extend

\textsuperscript{134} Ibid., 237.
\textsuperscript{135} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{136} Ibid., 237-38.
\textsuperscript{137} Ibid., 238.
\textsuperscript{138} Ibid.
far beyond those who committed them. At the end of this lengthy paragraph, the narrator uses this intertext in much the same way she used the story of Sisyphus: to connect her own experiences with those of her ancestors. Her grandfather lived in Kyiv in the 1930s, the era in which the palace served as a torture site and in which the Holodomor—the Great Ukrainian Famine of 1932-33—took place. Yet as millions of Ukrainian peasants and farmers began to die of starvation, the narrator explains, her grandfather rose to higher positions within the Soviet-controlled agricultural industry. Considering her grandfather’s potential complicity in this catastrophe, the narrator closes the paragraph that began by describing her childhood Garden of Eden with “hat auch er sich schuldig gemacht?”\textsuperscript{139}

Though both exist throughout the book, the majority of Greek intertexts appears in its latter half, while the majority of Jewish intertexts appears much earlier, in the subsection of the second chapter that focuses on Simon Geller and his school for deaf-mute children. The eventual ability of Geller’s students to not only read and write, but also lipread and speak both Hebrew and German is described with reference to the Torah as well: “[Die Schüler] bewegten ihre schweren Zungen, hoben die Steine der Laute, ihr Prophet Mose hatte auch einen schwerfälligen Mund und eine schwere Zunge gehabt.”\textsuperscript{140} In the same section, the narrator suggests that her family’s origins are woven into the very fabric of the other principal Jewish text:

Vielleicht kamen die Meinigen direkt aus dem Talmud, aus der Geschichte der zwei Taubstummen, die nicht weit vom Rabbiner wohnten und ihm immer in die Schule folgten, in der er unterrichtete, und die neben ihm saßen, ihn aufmerksam beobachteten und dazu ihre Lippen bewegten. Der Rabbiner betete für sie, und irgendwann wurde festgestellt, dass sie alles wussten, was der Rabbiner seinen Schülern beigebracht hatte, sie hatten alles gelernt, mit den Augen.\textsuperscript{141}

\textsuperscript{139} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{140} Ibid., 53.
\textsuperscript{141} Ibid., 52.
As Simon Geller represents the narrator’s earliest known and named forefather, any origins beyond him have been lost. In the absence of genealogical or historical information, the Talmud becomes the surrogate source for the narrator and her maternal family line, connecting them textually to both their foremost profession and to their ethnoreligious group. In linking her specific family to this specific Talmudic tractate—Ḥagigah 3a in the Babylonian Talmud—the narrator is unabashedly confirming and validating their Jewishness.\textsuperscript{142} Though Michaelis-König argues that in \textit{Vielleicht Esther} Judaism is “mostly associated with death and suffering,” these Torahic and Talmudic intertexts demonstrate that Jewishness in Petrowskaja’s book bears positive associations as well.\textsuperscript{143}

Yet Petrowskaja’s incorporation of Jewish intertexts is not without nuance. While allusions to the Torah, the Talmud, and other Jewish texts demonstrate a certain sense of belonging to the Jewish people in much the same way allusions to Greek mythology demonstrate a sense of belonging to Europe, it is also clear in \textit{Vielleicht Esther} that for the narrator Judaism and Jewishness constitute a lost tradition, gradually suppressed over the last century first by Soviet policy, then by Nazi genocide. A third Jewish intertext in the section on Simon Geller demonstrates this concurrent sense of belonging and non-belonging. In Hebrew, the narrator explains, Geller’s first name means “der Hörende, derjenige, der von Gott gehört hat und von ihm erhört wird.”\textsuperscript{144} The first apostle to follow Jesus was also named Simon, the narrator points out, but she is quick to distance this intertext from the story of her family: “obwohl diese Geschichte für meine jüdischen Verwandten keine Bedeutung hatte.”\textsuperscript{145} Instead she zeroes in on the Hebrew meaning and its

\textsuperscript{142} b.Hag.3a, https://www.sefaria.org/Chagigah.3a.4?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en.
\textsuperscript{143} Michaelis-König, 151.
\textsuperscript{144} Petrowskaja, 50.
\textsuperscript{145} Ibid., 50-51.
relation to wider aspects of Judaism. Twice in this subsection about Simon Geller the roman-type paragraphs are punctuated with a short, italicized sentence. The first reads, “Sch’mä Israel, morgens und abends, Sch’mä Israel, höre Israel, höre mich,” and the second, “Sch’mä Israel, höre mich Israel, wo ist Israel?”

Both of these are plays on the first line of the Shema, the centerpiece of daily prayer services, often held to be the most essential prayer in all of Judaism. The actual prayer is derived from Deuteronomy 6:4 and is used to encapsulate the monotheistic nature of Judaism, reading, “Hear, Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is One” (שְׁמַעְיָהוּ הָיָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבָנָם). The narrator’s variations, however, eschew religiosity and instead encapsulate two differing aspects of her relationship to the Jewish people. Through their resemblance to the Hebrew prayer and the fact that Simon and Sch’mä both stem from the same triliteral Semitic root (עמש), the narrator’s variations intertextually and etymologically express an entrenched connection to Jewishness. Yet, in their searching and pleading language, they ideationally express a stark disconnection from this aspect of the narrator’s identity and a desire to recover this lost bond. The narrator’s imperative, “Höre mich Israel,” transforms this part of traditional Jewish liturgy from a broad declaration of faith to a specific, personal plea for connection and belonging. Though Michaelis-König’s analysis of the portrayal of Jewishness in Vielliecht Esther is perhaps unidimensional, his assertion that “[t]he integration of Jewish language and Jewishness into [Petrowskaja’s] account is the unsolved, and perhaps unsolvable, task of her writing” here rings true.

As the book progresses more or less chronologically through the stories of the narrator’s relatives, the fact that the greatest number of Jewish intertexts appears in this early chapter can be

146 Ibid., 50; 51.
147 Michaelis-König, 152.
taken as indication that the web of belonging woven by the narrator’s family becomes less and less explicitly Jewish throughout the generations. Yet Jewishness does not disappear completely from the narrator’s more recent tales. Later chapters include the aforementioned allusions to the Torah story of Adam and Eve as well as to that of Cain and Abel. The narrator references a series of Ashkenazi jokes about the foolish Abrascha, mentions both *Tevye the Dairyman* and its musical adaptation *Fiddler on the Roof*, and quotes the Jewish-American expatriate Gertrude Stein. Of the eight epigraphs in the book with definitive authors, five of them—Heinrich Heine (17), Ossip Mandelstam (134), Franz Kafka (141), Konrad Wolf (183), and Erich Fried (251)—are Jewish, and one section is titled “Der Prozess” after Kafka’s novel.148 That narrator’s Jewish family may have become less observant throughout time, but traces of their Jewish identity can still be found in these intertexts. And as these later intertexts are more secular and more widely known outside of Jewish circles than the Talmud or the *Shema*, they serve not only to connect the narrator to Jewishness but to Europeanness as well.

The link between Jewish and European identities is evident when the narrator discusses an intradiegetic text: her aunt Lida’s recipe for kvass, a fermented but non-alcoholic drink popular in Eastern Europe. The recipe, which the narrator finds only after her aunt’s death, is imprecisely labeled “ЕВР.КВАС” (“YEVR.KVAS”).149 The Cyrillic abbreviation, the narrator explains, could be short for either “ЕВРопейский, JEWropejskij, europäischer” or “ЕВРейский, JEWrejskij, jüdischer.”150 The narrator’s interpretation of this ambiguity links Jews, Europeans, and reading: it is “als ob Europa und die Juden aus einer Wurzel stammten und hier in diesem Rezept und in

148 The three epigraphs not attributed to a specific author include a Chinese proverb (49), a snippet from an unattributed newspaper article (146), and a dictionary entry (266).
149 Petrowskaja, 31.
150 Ibid.
dieser Abkürzung die erfrischende Hypothese steckte, dass alle Juden, auch die, die gar keine Juden mehr waren, sich zu den letzten Europäern zählen dürfen, schließlich haben sie alles gelesen, was Europa ausmacht.”

Instead of the anti-Semitic stereotype of cosmopolitanism that such associations between Jews and wider cultural groups often play into, the narrator interprets this connection between Judaism and Europe as a positive affirmation of the possibility of a hybrid, affiliative, and multifaceted identity. In this recipe, Jewishness and Europeanness are inextricably linked, woven together into the narrator’s web of belonging. Notably, it is the act of reading that the narrator presents as the tie between the two groups: “schließlich haben sie alles gelesen, was Europa ausmacht.” It is texts and their consumption that makes Europeans out of Jews, not their physical presence on the continent. Having read European literature, the Jews of Europe have added European nodes to their network of belonging.

This diegetic-level statement mirrors the meta-level function of intertexts in Petrowskaja’s book: her sense of belonging to a culture is largely determined by her encounter with that culture’s texts. Russian, German, Jewish, Greek-cum-European: all of her cultural and ethnic identities are constituted, connected, and conveyed through the various texts she has read. The act of reading, Graham Allen argues, is in fact the crux of intertextuality. In his understanding, reading “plunges us into a network of textual relations. To interpret a text, to discover its meaning, or meanings, is to trace those relations. Reading thus becomes a process of moving between texts.”

Tzvetan Todorov echoes this when he writes “The work of reading begins by bringing together, by discovering resemblance.” But if the narrator’s sense of (inter)cultural belonging is determined

151 Ibid.
152 Allen, 1.
by the (inter)texts she has read, then the limits of her belonging are dictated by what she is able to read. Texts that she cannot access or that are illegible cannot be woven into her web of intertextual belonging. Reflecting the plea of her modified Shema—“Höre mich Israel”—the texts in Vielleicht Esther that are inaccessible to the narrator largely have to do with her Jewish heritage. Towards the beginning of the book, the narrator describes how her grandmother Rosa, her vision rapidly deteriorating as she approached the end of her life, began to write down her memoirs. She did not number any of the loose leaf sheets on which she wrote her life story and occasionally she forgot to take a fresh page when she had made it to the bottom of one, resulting in layers of indecipherable script written overtop one another: “Eine Zeile ragte in die nächste hinein, eine weitere legte sich darüber, sie überlagerten sich wie Sandwellen am Strand, einer Naturkraft gehorchend, verknüelten sie sich im Bleistiftgekritzel, gehäkelte und gewebte Spinnen.”\footnote{Rosa’s writing, which is used as the book’s cover image, constitutes a web unto itself, but as it is illegible—“nicht zum Lesen gedacht, […] sondern zum Festhalten”—it cannot be connected to the narrator’s larger web of intercultural belonging.\footnote{This palimpsestic Spitzengekritzel has lost any referential, discursive, or dialogic potential, symbolizing a Jewish heritage and history that is known to exist, but is indecipherable and inaccessible. The missing Yiddish original to the Russian-translated article about Simon Geller constitutes another such inaccessible Jewish text. The multinodal, inclusive, and synchronic network of belonging that Petrowskaja’s book puts forth contrasts starkly with the overly simplistic, exclusive, and diachronic memory spaces that the narrator critiques throughout the course of Vielleicht Esther. Yet, as the web of intertextuality is the most expansive network of belonging present in the book, these missing or illegible texts demonstrate}}

\footnote{Petrowskaja, 61-62.}

\footnote{Ibid., 62.}
that the scope of the narrator’s intercultural, multilingual, and transnational identity may be expansive and affiliative, but is not infinite. However strongly Petrowskaja challenges traditional, fixed notions of belonging, she ultimately cannot circumvent historical sociopolitical circumstances that render certain aspects of her textual identity illegible, and therefore inaccessible.
CONCLUSION

Perhaps nothing is as intrinsic to human culture as storytelling. As Hayden White, a historian of literary criticism and literature writes, our predisposition to recognize and find value in narrativity is a “panglobal fact of culture.” From the myths and epics that survive from ancient times to the fairy tales and nursery rhymes we view as near necessary kindling for a child’s growth, it is evident that from the beginning of human development on—both phylogenically and ontogenically—stories have played and continue to play an enormous role for our species. Less evident, though, is the reason behind this. Scholars, philosophers, clerics, writers—people from every imaginable background—have ventured hypotheses as to why it is that human beings throughout time and across the globe gravitate towards narrative.

A great number of such hypotheses can be found in the seemingly chaotic and confusing words of the Talmud. With reference specifically to haggadah—the notion discussed in the introduction to this dissertation that describes stories and narratives in the Jewish exegetical tradition—writers of the Talmud argue that such stories make complex topics easier for the layperson to understand, similar to the function of Christian parables.1 Elsewhere, it is asserted that one’s knowledge is incomplete without knowing and understanding stories.2 In addition to these explanations of the importance and function of storytelling that focus on the transmission of knowledge, a number of Talmud tractates reference the unique ability of stories to emotionally affect their listeners or readers, as in Hagigah 14a in the Babylonian Talmud, which states “These are the masters of haggadah, who draw men’s hearts with stories as easily as one draws water

---

from a well.” Another common interpretation of the function of stories is that they alone allow one to access the “hidden meaning” of the world. In what is likely the most striking discussion on the topic, one Talmud contributor writes, “If you wish to know God, study haggadah.”

Removed by thousands of miles and hundreds centuries from the writers of these now ancient Talmud tractates, the three authors whose works have been discussed in the course of this dissertation all posit their own ideas as to the role of stories and narrative. In many instances, this is done explicitly, with the narrator directly commenting on her identity as a writer, her lifetime as a reader, or her general conception of stories and their telling. But at the same as they are explicitly articulating their understanding of narrative, all three of the authors implicitly communicate the same topic through their construction of their own writing at the meta-level. Though they are similar in their identities as Jewish women writing in German, Honigmann, Lustiger, and Petrowskaja present conceptions of narrative and storytelling that are largely disparate.

In her employment of textual genres and narrative structures as means of organizing and imbuing past events with meaning, Barbara Honigmann accentuates the myriad of interpretative possibilities inherent in narrative. In her 1986 Roman von einem Kinde, 1999 Damals, dann und danach, and 2004 Ein Kapitel aus meinem Leben, Honigmann explores both her own complex identity as a German Jew living in a traditional Jewish community in France and the remarkable life stories of her parents. Her father appears in great measure and the memories he reports to his daughter are intriguing and compelling, but is it largely Honigmann’s mother whose story stands in the spotlight, with the titular Kapitel from the Honigmann’s 2004 book referring to the period of her life she spent in interwar Paris married to Kim Philby and working as a spy. Yet these stories

---

from her parents’ lives are never really told; they are merely hinted at. Traditional features of plot and narrativity, such as continuity, causality, and teleology play no role in Honigmann’s autofiction and she is firmly disinterested in reconstructing her parents’ lives, either through their own verbal accounts or through research. Instead of using narrative to reconstruct her family’s past, Honigmann employs it to create her own sense of identity and self in the present. In all three of her autofictional works discussed in this chapter, her identity is constituted almost entirely through texts. Rather than being passed down from her parents, her Jewish identity is learned and absorbed from books as an adolescent and from continued textual study as an adult in Strasbourg. Her sense of Germanness similarly originates in texts, as—like so many other German Jewish authors—her strongest connection to the country of her birth exists via its literature and language.

But Honigmann’s understanding of narrative appears most interestingly and most innovatively when she does discuss her parents’ histories. Never does she actually recount the events that they related to her through storytelling, but in her meta-level discussions of these tales, Honigmann organizes these memories of her parents into textual genres, identifying them as novels, chapters, epics, and legends. These generic and structural designations appear innocent at first, but a careful analysis of them reveals that they each have a carefully calibrated meaning and that Honigmann does not use them carelessly. Indeed, by relating her parents’ memories to textual genres and structures, Honigmann subtly presents the readers with information as to the role these stories have played in her life and the lives of her parents. The contents of the novels, legends, and epics she references are less important in the cosmology of her autofiction than their identification as these specific genres. By terming something an epic, for instance, Honigmann draws a connection to all other epics of the Western canon, thereby informing the reader that these memories carry the same weight for her family as epics do for their societies of origin. At the same
time, however, Honigmann’s classification of her parents’ memories as various genres and structures works against the stabilization of meaning. By rendering them texts, these memories become eternally available for “rereading” and reinterpreting. And as Honigmann returns to the same anecdotes and memories again and again throughout her writing, she herself engages in this constant activity of text interpretation.

In her critique of modes of memory transmissions that erase or limit affective involvement, Gila Lustiger emphasizes the capacity of narrative for engendering emotion. Throughout her 2005 *So sind wir*, Lustiger tells stories from the lives of her German Jewish father and Israeli Jewish mother and maternal grandparents. As she recounts these tales, however, Lustiger also develops and articulates a schema of memory transmission. Her father’s method of relating to memory is characterized by silence and a lack of emotionality. Lustiger associates his relationship to memory with newspapers, which she sees as representing a mnemonic orientation that is overly reliant on fact to the exclusion of other means of knowing—in particular to the exclusion of emotion—and as presenting a falsely ordered version of the world. The method of memory transmission employed by her mother and maternal grandmother, in contrast, is both communicative and emotive. The two matriarchs in the narrator’s family engage in routines of oral storytelling, narrating the events of childhoods in Israel and immigrations from Eastern Europe to British Mandate Palestine, and inspiring many positive feelings in the narrator and her sister. Whereas Lustiger views oral storytelling more sanguinely than she does her father’s newspapers and the relationship to memory they symbolize, she also indicates that oral storytelling has a propensity towards didacticism. The stories of her mother and grandmother are told not only to entertain and to inform, but also to foster a sense of Jewishness and a relationship to Israel in the narrator and her sister, something that is portrayed with a certain degree of reprobation by Lustiger.
The method of memory transmission that Lustiger esteems most highly is that of the (at least quasi-) literary written word. Books occupy a middle ground between the poles of newspapers and oral storytelling: they are both masculine and feminine, silent and communicative. Most importantly, books allow for a wide range of emotions, far beyond the purely positive feelings inspired by oral storytelling. And because the interpretation of books takes place on the reader’s terms and in the reader’s own time, they are less manipulative than oral storytelling, while still being more informative than her father’s silence. Books, such as the one the narrator encounters that contains her father’s memories from the Second World War, present an open semiotic space in which the reader can experience an array of emotions and use them to construct meaning themselves. This affective meaning-making potential that Lustiger ascribes to books, however, is not achieved by her in her own writing. Throughout the first half of *So sind wir*, rather than creating a space for the reader to produce their own meaning and interpretation, the narrator uses metanarration to simulate the same effects that she disapproves of in oral storytelling, manipulating the reader into aligning themselves with the narrator’s point of view.

In her interweaving of many different texts from cultures across Europe, but predominantly from Greek, Jewish, Russian, and German origins, Katja Petrowskaja highlights the ability of narrative and texts to foster interconnection and complexity. In her 2015 *Vielleicht Esther*, Petrowskaja recounts her long journey as she attempts to piece together the history of her family, which has been obscured and sometimes even erased by a century of oppression under Soviet and Nazi powers. Along this journey, she ventures to a number of institutionalized memory spaces, from archives in Poland and Russia, the German Historical Museum in Berlin, and memorial sites at Auschwitz, Babi Yar, and Mauthausen. Despite the fact that her family bears a historical relation in some way to all of these memory spaces, the narrator of Petrowskaja’s book does not find the
sense of understanding, connection, or belonging she seeks. Instead, she rejects the various memory sites, arguing that they reproduce imbalanced and oppressive historical power structures, they that present overly pat, linear, and coherent versions of history, and that they inherently separate people into distinct groups rather than fostering empathy and kinship.

Where these memory spaces fail in Petrovskaia’s estimation, however, literature and texts succeed. Throughout her book, she weaves a vast network of intertexts—the table in the appendix identities 72 different instances of intertextuality—that stem from cultures across the continent. Russian poetry, German fairy tales, Greek myth, Jewish Torah stories are knitted together along with other European texts. The narrator of Vielleicht Esther bears a complex identity. She was born in Soviet Kyiv to Jewish parents, grew up speaking Russian, and immigrated to Germany as an adult. By connecting all of these many intertexts and by demonstrating their similarities rather than their differences, Petrovskaia instantiates a notion of belonging that is not divisive, as in the various memorial spaces she visits, but rather affiliative and synchronic. The web of texts she weaves in Vielleicht Esther allows her to simultaneously identify as a Russian-speaker and a Ukrainian, a German and a Jew, a Russian and a European—intersections of identity that are often see as contradictory or mutually exclusive. Additionally, her incorporation of Jewish texts works to an extent to recover her lost Jewish heritage, as she finds connection with these narratives and their authors.

Despite these vast differences in the ways Honigmann, Lustiger, and Petrovskaia conceive of narrative and its role in human life, there are some similarities as well. The tripartite function haggadah that can be gleaned from the multiple meanings of its Aramaic root—expanding/drawing out, binding/drawing in, and flowing—is present in the works of each of these authors. In not only allowing but also privileging multiple interpretations of the same text,
Honigmann expands a narrative’s potential for meaning-making and therefore its ability to engender understanding and knowledge. For Lustiger, narrative expands emotional comprehension. To her, storytelling at its best creates a space in which one can experience and learn from a range of emotions. Petrowskaja, meanwhile, uses narrative and texts to expand her sense of belonging. The many intertexts in her book work to weave a broad intercultural web that can incorporate a number of different cultures, allegiances, and affiliations.

The second function of narrative—to bind or to draw together—is present in the works of these three authors as well. Honigmann uses texts and narratives to forge a sense of Jewish belonging, both as an adolescent when she begins reading Jewish texts and as an adult, when she participates in a weekly Torah study group with friends in Strasbourg. But texts also serve to bind Honigmann’s German and Jewish identities together. These two facets of her identity remain largely disparate in Honigmann’s real life—she left Germany, after all, because she felt she could not live a Jewish life there. In writing about her Jewishness in the medium of the German language, however, Honigmann’s texts unite these two sometimes conflicting parts of her identity. Lustiger also demonstrates the ability of narratives to bring people together and create a sense of belonging, though for her this occurs largely through the unique emotional effect narratives can have. The stories she hears from her mother and grandmother foster a Jewish identity in Lustiger’s narrator, and connect her to her mother’s homeland of Israel despite her physical presence in Germany. For Petrowskaja, narratives and texts bind her similarly to Jewishness, but they connect her to many other cultures as well. Where politically motivated memory practices and historical fact no longer function to create a sense of belonging and connection, texts bridge the gap. Aspects of her identity that she feels culturally distant from, such as her Jewish heritage, or that no longer exist politically,
like her Soviet childhood, or that are new to her, as in her Germany residency, are all accessible to her through texts and narratives.

The last function of narrative—to flow or transmit—also appears in different ways in these authors’ works. By transforming memory and life experience into recognizable and retallable texts, as Honigmann does, she is rendering it into something that can be passed through generations and across groups and cultures. Though our constant reinterpretation changes how we understand texts, their presence does not change. Narratives, in Honigmann’s works, become an evolving permanence that can be reinterpreted throughout time. Lustiger’s perspective highlights the unique ability of narrative and storytelling to transmit emotional knowledge to others. Though other, more fact-based fields may enable us to know that or to know how, it is only narrative that gives us the means to know what is it like. Viewed through this lens, this function of narrative to transmit emotional knowledge grows ever more vital as time passes and the historical events of the twentieth century recede further into the past. This diachronic system of transmission exists, however, alongside a synchronic system. In Petrowskaja’s book, texts are capable of traveling across cultures, bringing the insight they contain and the sense of belonging they engender along with them. Though they may have different inflections and valences in accordance with each author’s perspective, narratives, texts, reading, writing, and storytelling play important roles in the works of these German Jewish writers: expanding their multiplex identities, binding then and creating belonging to a range of cultures and communities, and facilitating the flow of memory between generations and across lines of ethnicity, religion, nationality, and language.
## APPENDIX

### List of Intertexts in Katja Petrowskaja’s *Vielleicht Esther*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Author/Creator</th>
<th>Cultural Origin</th>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Location in VE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>“Ein Fichtenbaum steht einsam”</td>
<td>Heinrich Heine</td>
<td>German, Jewish</td>
<td>poetry</td>
<td>epigraph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>The Odyssey</td>
<td>Homer</td>
<td>Greek</td>
<td>Greek myth</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>general writings</td>
<td>Anna Akhmatova</td>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Don Quijote</td>
<td>Cervantes</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>literary</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>Ivan Tsarevich</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>fairy tales</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>poem from Motherland monument</td>
<td>Olga Bergholz</td>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>poetry</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>Shema</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>scriptural</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>New Testament</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>biblical</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52</td>
<td>Babylonia Talmud</td>
<td>Anna Akhmatova</td>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53</td>
<td>Tor – Moses</td>
<td>Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels</td>
<td>German</td>
<td>political</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59</td>
<td>Torah – Adam and Eve</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>biblical</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61</td>
<td>Ariadne</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Greek</td>
<td>Greek myth</td>
<td>subsection title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62</td>
<td>Ariadne</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Greek</td>
<td>Greek myth</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>68</td>
<td><em>On the Origin of the Species</em></td>
<td>Charles Darwin</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>scientific</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>68</td>
<td>Metamorpheses</td>
<td>Ovid</td>
<td>Latin</td>
<td>narrative poem</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>78</td>
<td>“The Russian Language”</td>
<td>Ivan Turgenev</td>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>poetry</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>78</td>
<td>“O du fröhliche”</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>German</td>
<td>Christmas carol</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>91</td>
<td>Dubliners</td>
<td>James Joyce</td>
<td>Irish</td>
<td>literary</td>
<td>epigraph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>107</td>
<td>Teve the Dairyman stories</td>
<td>Sholem Aleichem</td>
<td>Jewish, Yiddish</td>
<td>short stories</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>107</td>
<td>Fiddler on the Roof</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Jewish, American</td>
<td>musical</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>111</td>
<td>Nike</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Greek</td>
<td>Greek myth</td>
<td>subsection title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>111</td>
<td>Oresteia</td>
<td>Iannis Xenakis</td>
<td>Romanian, Greek, French</td>
<td>classical music</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>128</td>
<td>“Der goldene Schlüssel”</td>
<td>Brothers Grimm</td>
<td>German</td>
<td>fairy tales</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>131</td>
<td>Torah – Adam and Eve</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>biblical</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>134</td>
<td>The Egyptian Stamp</td>
<td>Osip Mandelstam</td>
<td>Russian, Jewish</td>
<td>literary</td>
<td>epigraph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>136</td>
<td>New Testament – Andrew the Apostle</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>biblical</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>145</td>
<td>Sword of Damocles</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Greek</td>
<td>Greek myth</td>
<td>subsection title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>146</td>
<td>Sword of Damocles</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Greek</td>
<td>Greek myth</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>153</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Goethe</td>
<td>German</td>
<td>literary</td>
<td>subsection title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>155</td>
<td>“Wandrers Nachtlied II”</td>
<td>Goethe</td>
<td>German</td>
<td>poetry</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>155</td>
<td>translation of “Wandrers Nachtlied II”</td>
<td>Mikhail Lermontov</td>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>poetry</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>156</td>
<td>The Master and the Margarita</td>
<td>Mikhail Bulgakov</td>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>literary</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>157</td>
<td>New Testament – Jesus</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>biblical</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>157</td>
<td>Russian fairy tales (general)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>fairy tales</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>159</td>
<td>Der Prozess</td>
<td>Franz Kafka</td>
<td>German, Jewish</td>
<td>literary</td>
<td>subsection title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>159</td>
<td>Medusa</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Greek</td>
<td>Greek myth</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>176</td>
<td>Medusa</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Greek</td>
<td>Greek myth</td>
<td>subsection title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>177</td>
<td>Medusa</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Greek</td>
<td>Greek myth</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>183</td>
<td>Der nackte Mann auf dem Sportplaz</td>
<td>Konrad Wolf</td>
<td>German, Jewish</td>
<td>film</td>
<td>epigraph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>198</td>
<td>Die schöne Müllerin</td>
<td>Franz Schubert</td>
<td>German, Austrian</td>
<td>classical music</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>200</td>
<td>Helen of Troy</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Greek</td>
<td>Greek myth</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Page</td>
<td>Text</td>
<td>Author/Creator</td>
<td>Cultural Origin</td>
<td>Genre</td>
<td>Location in VE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>207</td>
<td>Abrascha the Milkman jokes</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Jewish, Yiddish</td>
<td>jokes</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>208</td>
<td>aphorism</td>
<td>Socrates</td>
<td>Greek</td>
<td>philosophy</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>212</td>
<td>Zeno’s Paradox – Achilles and the Tortoise</td>
<td>Zeno of Elea</td>
<td>Greek</td>
<td>philosophy</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>214</td>
<td>Homeric epic (general)</td>
<td>Homer</td>
<td>Greek</td>
<td>Greek myth</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>215</td>
<td>Koschei the Deathless</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>fairy tales</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>216</td>
<td>Achilles</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Greek</td>
<td>Greek myth</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>232</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Alfred Hitchcock</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>film</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>233</td>
<td>“Ein Winterabend”</td>
<td>Georg Trakl</td>
<td>German, Austrian</td>
<td>poetry</td>
<td>epigraph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>234</td>
<td>The Little Prince</td>
<td>Antoine de Saint-Exupéry</td>
<td>French</td>
<td>literary</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>237</td>
<td>Torah – Adam and Eve</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>Biblical</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>239</td>
<td>“Sitting on a Beautiful Hill”</td>
<td>Akvarium</td>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>rock music</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>239</td>
<td>Alice in Wonderland</td>
<td>Lewis Carroll</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>literary</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>239</td>
<td>The Name of the Rose</td>
<td>Umberto Eco</td>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>literary</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>239</td>
<td>“Sacred Emily”</td>
<td>Gertrude Stein</td>
<td>American, Jewish</td>
<td>poetry</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>239</td>
<td>Dolce Vita</td>
<td>Federico Fellini</td>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>film</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>241</td>
<td>The Inferno</td>
<td>Dante Alighieri</td>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>narrative</td>
<td>epigraph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>243</td>
<td>“I go out on the road alone”</td>
<td>Mikhail Lermontov</td>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>poetry</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>243</td>
<td>Translation of “I go out on the road alone”</td>
<td>Rainer Marie Rilke</td>
<td>German</td>
<td>poetry</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>245</td>
<td>Vasilisa the Beautiful/Vasilisa the Wise</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>fairy tales</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>251</td>
<td>“Fragelied”</td>
<td>Erich Fried</td>
<td>German, Austrian, Jewish</td>
<td>poetry</td>
<td>epigraph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>251</td>
<td>Torah – Adam and Eve</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>biblical</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>251</td>
<td>Torah – Cain and Abel</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>biblical</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>259</td>
<td>Tristan and Isolde</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>British</td>
<td>biblical</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>262</td>
<td>Athena</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Greek</td>
<td>Greek myth</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>266</td>
<td>Sisyphus</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Greek</td>
<td>Greek myth</td>
<td>subsection title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>268</td>
<td>Torah – Adam and Eve</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>Biblical</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>270</td>
<td>Sisyphus</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Greek</td>
<td>Greek myth</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>277</td>
<td>Apocalypse Now</td>
<td>Francis Ford Coppola</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>film</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>281</td>
<td>“Night, street, lamp, drugstore”</td>
<td>Alexander Blok</td>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>poetry</td>
<td>narration</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Nolden, Thomas and Vivian Liska. Introduction to *Contemporary Jewish Writing in Europe*. 200


Wanner, Adrian. “Journeys of Identity: From Soviet Jew to German Writer.” In *Migration and


