

## Moments of possibility

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**Moments of Possibility. Holocaust Postmemory,  
Subjunctivity, and Futurity in Katja Petrowskaja's *Vielleicht  
Esther* (2014) and Robert Menasse's *Die Hauptstadt* (2017)**

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3 **Abstract:** This article examines subjunctive approaches to history and memory as a novel  
4 aesthetic and ethical mode of Holocaust (post-)memory in two prominent examples of  
5 contemporary German-Jewish fiction. I argue that Katja Petrowskaja's *Vielleicht Esther*  
6 (2014) and Robert Menasse's *Die Hauptstadt* (2017) develop subjunctive modes of  
7 Holocaust (post-)memory as a response to a crisis of witnessing in the post-survivor era.  
8 Faced with the dying out of the survivor generation and the increasing institutionalization  
9 and hypermediation of Holocaust memories, these two authors invoke the subjunctive to  
10 self-reflexively account for their historical positionality and critique monolithic memory  
11 discourses (Petrowskaja), while also aiming to (re-)invest a stagnant culture of Holocaust  
12 memory with political urgency and futurity (Menasse). Subjunctivity thus emerges as a  
13 central yet underexamined mode of contemporary German-Jewish writing which has the  
14 potential to transform wider cultures of Holocaust (post-)memory, by moving 'beyond the  
15 traumatic' (Rigney 2018) in the direction of futurity.  
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28 **Keywords:** Subjunctive Remembering; Holocaust Literature; German-Jewish Literature;  
29 Postmemory; Futurity; Sideshadowing; Indirect Witnessing; Ethics of Memory  
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3 Moments of Possibility. Holocaust Postmemory, Subjunctivity, and Futurity in Katja  
4 Petrowskaja's *Vielleicht Esther* (2014) and Robert Menasse's *Die Hauptstadt* (2017)  
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9 1. Introduction: 'Exercises in Speculation'

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12 Shortly before Christmas 2018, the Austrian-Jewish author and public intellectual Robert  
13 Menasse, a long-standing favourite of the German feuilleton and recent recipient of the  
14 prestigious *Deutscher Buchpreis*,<sup>1</sup> became the unexpected centre of a literary scandal: in  
15 numerous articles, essays, speeches and, most recently, in his novel *Die Hauptstadt*,  
16 Menasse has been campaigning for a post-national Europe, citing one of the founding  
17 fathers of the European Union, Walter Hallstein, in support of his views. As it turns out,  
18 many of the direct quotes used have been fabricated by Menasse,<sup>2</sup> and the same might hold  
19 true for statements attributed to Jean Monnet, another important figure for the history of  
20 the European project.<sup>3</sup> When confronted with these allegations of forgery, Menasse  
21 remained defiant: 'Der Sinn ist korrekt. Die Wahrheit ist belegbar. Die These ist fruchtbar.  
22 Was fehlt, ist das Geringste: das Wortwörtliche'.<sup>4</sup>  
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33 While Menasse's nonchalant attitude is problematic in an era of fake news and post-  
34 truth politics, this article wants to examine the more productive ways in which  
35 contemporary German-Jewish writing about the Holocaust reconsiders not so much the  
36 status of reality and/or factuality, but the representational mode of realism. This  
37 renegotiation manifests itself in an increased popularity of the subjunctive mood and/or  
38 subjunctive approaches to history in recent examples of Holocaust writing, tied to  
39 speculations about both alternative pasts and unrealized futures. I will examine this device  
40 in texts by Katja Petrowskaja and Robert Menasse, two prominent voices in contemporary  
41 German Jewish discourse, arguing that these writers' 'exercises in speculation' respond to a  
42 crisis in remembering and witnessing the Holocaust in the age of 'postmemory'.<sup>5</sup> Although  
43 representative of different ages, genders as well as cultural, linguistic and national  
44 backgrounds, Katja Petrowskaja and Robert Menasse share a concern with the afterlives of  
45 the Holocaust as they present themselves from the perspective of the 'nonwitness'.<sup>6</sup> They  
46 thus belong to what Marianne Hirsch has termed the 'generation of postmemory',<sup>7</sup> i.e.  
47 those who, due to historical distance, have no personal access to the past and can only  
48 approach and 'witness' it belatedly. Hirsch initially coined the term 'postmemory' to  
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3 describe the ways in which the children of Holocaust survivors relate to and are shaped by  
4 their parents' past. As they have not personally experienced the powerful events of the  
5 past, they cannot remember them in the literal sense; instead, they have a 'postmemory',  
6 which is 'mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and  
7 creation'.<sup>8</sup> What the subsequent generations cannot possibly remember, they must imagine  
8 or invent, which puts fiction, in the broadest sense, at the centre of Hirsch's work. In recent  
9 years, Hirsch has gradually expanded the circle of those who can have a postmemorial  
10 response to a traumatic past. Apart from including the second as well as the third  
11 generation of Holocaust survivors, a postmemorial relation can also be formed by those  
12 who are not biologically related to the survivor generation, but connect to the Holocaust via  
13 'affiliative', i.e. culturally mediated, channels. This has led to an expansion (and some would  
14 say depletion) of the term in Hirsch's own work and other scholarship on the matter.

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16 This conceptual extension of the 'generation of postmemory' has made it increasingly  
17 hard to define what key features of this very heterogeneous cohort and its artistic  
18 production might be, as is the case for the related concepts of the so-called second- or  
19 third-generation of Holocaust writers.<sup>9</sup> While there is a fairly lively debate on these topics in  
20 the US-American context, systematic approaches to the newest developments in Holocaust  
21 literature are only beginning to emerge in the German-language context.<sup>10</sup> One element  
22 that potentially unites the 'generation of postmemory' in its approach to the past is the  
23 need to, in some shape or form, speculate, since it is comprised of what Gary Weissman  
24 terms 'nonwitness[es]'.<sup>11</sup> This article wants to advance ongoing debates, by drawing  
25 attention to a specific form of speculation in recent Holocaust fiction, namely the use of the  
26 subjunctive. While the reliance on speculation can already be gleaned from the title of Katja  
27 Petrowskaja's debut *Vielleicht Esther*,<sup>12</sup> its significance is less apparent for Menasse's *Die*  
28 *Hauptstadt*, which is also less obviously a Holocaust text.<sup>13</sup> However, the novel's  
29 deliberations on past, present and future constructions of Europe rely heavily on the idea  
30 that history consists not only of actualities, but also of unrealized possibilities, understood  
31 as that 'was hätte sein können und unerlöst weiterschwelte' (*DH*, 447).

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33 Taking inspiration from the term 'subjunctive remembering', as it has been coined by  
34 Maya Caspari,<sup>14</sup> I will demonstrate that the subjunctive constructions in Petrowskaja's and  
35 Menasse's writing represent both a variation and an enhancement of Hirsch's idea of  
36 'postmemory' as 'imaginative investment and creation',<sup>15</sup> as they stress not so much the  
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3 need to fill the gaps in knowledge, but rather highlight the necessary contingency of  
4 historical processes whose outcome, while not being deniable or reversible, needs to be  
5 seen as merely one option amongst many. In contrast to the past-oriented traumatic  
6 determinism that underpins Hirsch's theory, the stress on the unrealized potential of a  
7 different result promotes 'futurity' and agency,<sup>16</sup> as noted by Petrowskaja: 'History is a set  
8 of different possibilities. I was looking for turns, moments of bifurcation, moments of non-  
9 acceptance: a moment when you can change the shape of history, even if only in the  
10 subjunctive'.<sup>17</sup> I will therefore illustrate that the subjunctive approach concerns not only  
11 memories of the past, as implied by Caspari's term, but equally projections of the future. In  
12 fact, these two cannot be separated, as the future is opened up via recourse to and a re-  
13 examination of the past, specifically its unfulfilled potentials. The subjunctive approach  
14 therefore coalesces with a strong ethical agenda for both writers, which opens up a horizon  
15 beyond the intrafamilial transmission of Holocaust trauma, as the description of past  
16 catastrophes is complemented by what Amir Eshel calls their 'redescription' [emphasis in  
17 the original, MRL].<sup>18</sup> This entails a recalibration of Holocaust memories in light of their  
18 future and their future opportunities. This happens at a time when the generation of  
19 eyewitnesses is perishing and the memory of the Holocaust has become increasingly  
20 entrenched in ritual and routine – developments which raise urgent questions about the  
21 preservation and transmission of this memory for the future. In a moment of crisis, these  
22 writers thus imagine not only potential different pathways of history, but also alternative  
23 futures for its memory, which may reinvigorate what is widely perceived as a 'festgezurter'  
24 and stagnant discourse of Holocaust commemoration.<sup>19</sup>

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26 Subjunctive constructions thus represent an important feature of both contemporary  
27 Holocaust fiction and wider postmemorial discourse that has not yet been systematically  
28 addressed.<sup>20</sup> They potentially connect to a larger 'anti-realist' turn in contemporary  
29 Holocaust writing, epitomized by the popularity of magical realist tropes,<sup>21</sup> for example in  
30 the writing of David Grossmann, Nicole Krauss and Jonathan Safran Foer and, in the  
31 German-language realm, of Benjamin Stein and Maxim Biller.<sup>22</sup> These developments are  
32 complemented by the emergence of counterfactual histories of the Holocaust, for example  
33 in Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* or Timur Vermes' *Er ist wieder da*.<sup>23</sup> The  
34 rise of subjunctive approaches adds an additional facet to these 'conflicted realisms',<sup>24</sup> as  
35 Jenni Adams calls them. While Magical Realism enhances reality by way of fantastical  
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3 elements, counterfactual histories arguably flesh out alternative pathways of the past to  
4 shed light on what actually happened, thus examining the present. By comparison,  
5 subjunctive memories, as they are developed in the two examples presented here,  
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7 underscore the quintessential openness of the past, the present and the future, highlighting  
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9 potentiality and unrealized possibilities, while also providing ethical opportunities for  
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11 recuperating a seemingly lost history from the perspective of the 'nonwitness'.  
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14 The emergence of 'conflicted realisms', and of subjunctivity in particular, arguably  
15 reflects the need for new mode(l)s of approaching the past in the post-survivor era, while  
16 also resonating with broader attempts to move 'beyond the traumatic' in recent memory  
17 discourse,<sup>25</sup> as it brings into focus potential alternative pathways of history and, along with  
18 it, unrealized opportunities for the future, fuelling 'memor[ies] of hope'.<sup>26</sup> The subjunctive  
19 approach moreover accentuates the specific potentials of the arts to contribute to debates  
20 about the future of Holocaust memories, since it is inextricably tied to imagination and  
21 speculation and thus fiction(s) in the broadest sense. Its popularity in recent Holocaust  
22 discourse brings out the significance of literature, and the arts more generally, when trying  
23 to debate and envision the future of Holocaust memory.  
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## 34 2. 'Mangelnder Respekt vor der Grammatik' – The Conundrums of (Non-)Witnessing in 35 36 *Vielleicht Esther*

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39 Katja Petrowskaja's postmemorial family narrative *Vielleicht Esther* attempts to reconstruct  
40 a patchy Jewish family history that spans several countries, including Austria, Poland, Russia  
41 and the Ukraine and major events in modern (Eastern) European history such as the Russian  
42 Revolution, The Second World War, the Holocaust and Stalinism. The Ukrainian-born, first-  
43 person narrator's genealogical search is spurred by an overwhelming 'Gefühl des Verlustes'  
44 (VE, 22) which has haunted her since childhood.<sup>27</sup> She eventually understands that her  
45 unshakeable sense of a 'leise[n] Missklang' (VE, 24) in the ostentatiously joyful family  
46 celebrations and rituals was justified all along: several of her Jewish family members  
47 perished in the Holocaust which has created a family memory 'shot through with holes'.<sup>28</sup>  
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49 The situation was further aggravated by the politics of state-enforced amnesia in the Soviet  
50 context, which systematically denied the extent of Jewish suffering during the Holocaust.  
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60 The narrator initially tries to mend these holes in the family memory, in the hope of

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3 returning to a pre-traumatic fullness: '[...] und ich dachte, mit ihnen [the recovered dead  
4 relatives, MRL] werde ich den Familienbaum blühen lassen, den Mangel auffüllen, das  
5 Gefühl von Verlust heilen' (VE, 25).  
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9 However, she soon realizes that this is neither empirically possible nor ethically viable,  
10 for a number of reasons. First of all, most of the people she could speak to are dead, since,  
11 after the turn of the millennium, communicative, interpersonal memories of World War  
12 Two are swiftly transforming into cultural, i.e. institutionally mediated, modes of  
13 remembrance:  
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19 Geschichte ist, wenn es plötzlich keine Menschen mehr gibt, die man fragen kann, sondern  
20 nur noch Quellen. Ich hatte niemanden mehr, den ich hätte fragen können, der sich an diese  
21 Zeiten noch erinnern konnte. Was mir blieb: Erinnerungsfetzen, zweifelhafte Notizen und  
22 Dokumente in fernen Archiven (VE, 30).  
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29 As a member of the 'generation of postmemory', the narrator is thus dependent on  
30 'leftovers, debris, single items that are left to be collected and assembled in many ways',<sup>29</sup>  
31 in the form of family stories and various types of archival sources.<sup>30</sup> This also means that she  
32 is reliant on the accounts of various family members that are by no means accurate, due to  
33 both the unavoidable distortions of autobiographical memory and the politics of censorship,  
34 forgetting and silence that govern public as well as private memories. These become  
35 particularly apparent when the narrator begins to investigate the fate of her great-uncle  
36 Judas Stern who, in 1932, attempted to murder the German ambassador Fritz von  
37 Twardowski in Moscow. This relative was eradicated from the family memory, partially  
38 because it was dangerous to be associated with him, but also because his actions  
39 contradict(ed) the family's self-image: 'Er hat geschossen, hat einen Menschen töten wollen,  
40 und das hindert mich, ihn zu verstehen' (VE, 176).  
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51 The problems encountered on the micro-level of the family archive are replicated on  
52 the macro-level of official historiography. Raised in the Soviet bloc, the narrator grew up  
53 with a heroic narrative about the Second World War, which emphasized the monumental  
54 sacrifice of the Soviet people and completely blocked out Jewish suffering during the  
55 Holocaust, not least because of the long-standing and continuing histories of anti-Semitism  
56 in many (post-)Soviet countries. The aggressive commemoration of select victim groups  
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3 wrapped a veil of forgetfulness around others: '[...] man rief uns dazu auf, niemanden und  
4 nichts zu vergessen, damit wir vergassen, wer und was vergessen war' (VE, 40). These  
5 politics of remembering and/as forgetting proved particularly detrimental in the case of the  
6 Ukrainian Holocaust site of Babij Jar where the narrator lost several relatives. There were  
7 barely any survivors at the time of the Babij Jar massacre, as the Nazis enforced a policy of  
8 complete erasure, not only of the victims but also of any potential evidence that the killings  
9 took place. This was then complemented by a politics of silence in the Soviet and post-  
10 Soviet eras, so that an official memorial for the Jewish victims of the Babij Jar massacre was  
11 only erected in 1991, even though citizens of Jewish descent had undeniably been the prime  
12 target of the killings.<sup>31</sup> There were hence barely any surviving witnesses at the time, and  
13 those who knew about the killings either in their capacity as bystanders, as inhabitants of  
14 the city, or as bereaved family members, were systematically silenced. This has produced an  
15 inaccessible archive, comprising 'eine ganze Menge unsichtbarer Zeugen' (VE, 222), who are  
16 not registered anywhere and/or have passed away and/or can no longer be physically  
17 located: 'Sie sind die letzten Erzähler. Wohin sind sie alle umgezogen?' (VE, 222). These last  
18 narrators harbour a lost historiography and memory of Babij Jar, which will never find its  
19 way into the official records and modes of transmission.

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Amidst what could thus be termed a crisis of witnessing, caused by the unreliability and/or unavailability of public and private records, the eponymous adverb 'vielleicht' and the concomitant use of the subjunctive mood become the cornerstone of an aesthetics and ethics of indirect witnessing in the novel. This ethics embraces the postmemorial position of belatedness and the resulting reliance on speculation, as illustrated in the sub-chapter 'Vielleicht Esther', dedicated to the (potential) fate of the narrator's paternal great-grandmother. When fleeing the advancing German troops in 1941, the narrator's family left behind one of its members in Kiev who was too old and sick to make the journey. When trying to shed light on the fate of this woman, the narrator is confronted not only with the gaps in the official historical records, but also in the family memory:

Ich glaube, sie hieß Esther, sagte mein Vater. Ja, vielleicht Esther. Ich hatte zwei Großmütter und eine von ihnen hieß Esther, genau.  
Wie vielleicht?, fragte ich empört, du weißt nicht, wie deine Großmutter hieß?

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3 Ich habe sie nie bei ihrem Namen genannt, erwiderte mein Vater, ich sagte Babuschka, und  
4 meine Eltern sagten Mutter (VE, 209).  
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9 While feeling morally outraged at first, the narrator comes to accept the empirical  
10 unknowability of her great-grandmother's fate and instead uses 'alle Muskeln meines  
11 Gedächtnisses, meiner Phantasie und meiner Intuition' (VE, 221), i.e. what Hirsch describes  
12 as 'imaginative investment and creation',<sup>32</sup> to picture what her great-grandmother's last  
13 days, hours and seconds might have been like. She is, however, intensely aware that this  
14 needs to be a self-reflexive exercise that neither appropriates the inaccessible experience of  
15 the other (in this case the great-grandmother) nor blurs the boundary between fact and  
16 fiction in a redemptory manner, by disavowing the past so as to restore a pre-traumatic  
17 fullness. Hirsch opposes 'postmemory' to what she, echoing Toni Morrison, calls  
18 'rememory', as a type of memory that does not acknowledge the boundary between the  
19 past and the present, self and other and thus remains stuck in traumatic repetition.<sup>33</sup> In a  
20 similar manner to the 'post-' in Hirsch's concept, the 'vielleicht' and accompanying use of  
21 the subjunctive mood in Petrowskaja's text introduce a layer of distancing reflexion. Both  
22 post- and subjunctive memory entail an awareness of the positionality and mediatedness of  
23 one's access to history that distinguishes them from 'rememory'. However, whereas Hirsch  
24 assumes that temporality, in the sense of coming after, being 'post-', coincides with  
25 increased levels of reflectivity, Petrowskaja's text instead implies that this is an issue of  
26 modality. This also suggests that the reflectivity – and ethical viability – of specific artistic  
27 and/or memorial practices might be a matter of form above all else. These insights help to  
28 qualify Hirsch's thoughts on 'postmemory' in important ways. Hirsch has been criticized for  
29 assuming that historical and generational distance automatically generates greater  
30 reflectivity,<sup>34</sup> and her writing on 'postmemory' circles around the conundrums of  
31 establishing an ethically productive relationship with a past that is not one's own. Her idea  
32 of 'postmemory' runs the constant danger of becoming an appropriative 'rememory',  
33 signalling that historical distance alone might not be enough. By shifting the focus from  
34 temporality, understood as historical remoteness, to questions of modality and  
35 positionality, as they are for example implied in Gary Weissman's rejection of 'postmemory'  
36 in favour of the concept of the 'nonwitness',<sup>35</sup> some of the inherent contradictions in  
37 Hirsch's thought might be resolved.  
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3 This interplay between temporality, modality and positionality is illustrated when the  
4 narrator visits the *Deutsches Historisches Museum* with her daughter. When seeing the  
5 charts illustrating the Nuremberg Laws for the first time, her Jewish daughter reacts with  
6 the spontaneous question 'wo sind wir hier' (VE, 45) – the narrator, however, points out:  
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12 Eigentlich müsste man die Frage nicht im Präsens sondern im Imperfekt stellen und im  
13 Konjunktiv, wo wären wir gewesen, wenn wir damals gelebt hätten, wenn wir in diesem  
14 Land gelebt hätten – wenn wir jüdisch gewesen wären und damals hier gelebt hätten. Ich  
15 kenne diesen mangelnden Respekt vor der Grammatik, auch ich stelle mir solche Fragen, wo  
16 bin ich auf dem Bild, die mich aus der Welt der Vorstellung in die Realität versetzen, denn  
17 die Vermeidung des Konjunktivs macht aus einer Vorstellung eine Erkenntnis oder sogar  
18 einen Bericht, man nimmt die Stelle eines anderen ein, katapultiert sich dorthin [...], und so  
19 erprobe ich jede Rolle an mir selbst, als gäbe es keine Vergangenheit ohne irgendein Als-ob,  
20 Wenn oder Falls (VE, 45).  
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30 The narrator's reflections highlight the various achievements of 'subjunctive remembering':  
31 as demonstrated in the sub-chapter 'Vielleicht Esther', it protects the unknowability of the  
32 past, which, for the narrator, is only ever accessible as a 'Vorstellung', not as a 'Realität'. It  
33 furthermore affirms the boundary between the past and present, thus emphasizing  
34 historical positionality. As a consequence, the subjunctive mood also prevents the  
35 appropriation of someone else's experience and, in the case of her family story, someone  
36 else's victim status – it forces the narrator to acknowledge that she was not in Kiev at the  
37 time of the evacuation and that she was not the target of the Nuremberg Laws, even though  
38 she might have been. Additionally, the 'vielleicht' in 'Vielleicht Esther's' name also shifts the  
39 focus away from an individualized story of suffering towards the structural aspects of the  
40 violence experienced by the narrator's great-grandmother, as the uncertainty about her  
41 name is the result of the geno- and mnemocidal policies of the Nazi killing machinery. The  
42 'vielleicht' in her name thus extends towards all of those whose names are not only  
43 uncertain but even forgotten, providing a means for acknowledging the lost elements of any  
44 history. As such, the ethics of subjunctive remembering signifies the exact opposite of the  
45 ideological history- and memory-making that the narrator encounters throughout the book:  
46 whereas the official, family- and state-sponsored narratives construct a monolithic view of  
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3 history that is presented as objective, all the while requiring the repression of anything that  
4 does not fit the frame, the subjunctive approach takes seriously the impossibility (and  
5 danger) of an exhaustive take on history or memory, and tries to account for that which has  
6 been lost and/or wilfully suppressed. The narrator's implicit demand for more 'Respekt vor  
7 der Grammatik' is thus not only an epistemological, but also an ethical and a political issue.  
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12 While the 'vielleicht' thus serves to prevent appropriation and dismantle the  
13 ideological function of totalizing memory cultures, it arguably also opens the story of the  
14 great-grandmother up for adoption, as the author Petrowskaja herself has claimed: 'Es ist  
15 nicht meine Urgroßmutter. Jeder darf sie adoptieren. Es ging mir darum, dass dieses  
16 Unglück adoptiert werden soll'.<sup>36</sup> This is, arguably, one of the ways in which the ethics of  
17 subjunctive memory brings about 'futura'. The 'vielleicht' in 'Vielleicht Esther' does not  
18 only favour uncertainty and incompleteness over the false totality of master narratives, it  
19 also signifies openness towards the future. By inviting coming generations to adopt the  
20 victims and their 'Unglück', Petrowskaja champions alternative, non-familial pathways of  
21 transmission as a way to preserve Holocaust memories for the future, post-survivor era.  
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31 Another way in which the subjunctive mood promotes 'futura' is by underlining the  
32 contingency of historical processes. It thereby dislodges deterministic narratives which  
33 imply a false sense of necessity to historical developments that can then be used to justify  
34 and perpetuate the status quo as the only possible outcome, as noted by Petrowskaja  
35 herself:  
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41 Das war das Wichtigste für mein Buch: Es gibt überhaupt keine Selbstverständlichkeit, dass  
42 die Geschichte im 20. Jahrhundert in diese Richtung gegangen ist und nicht in die andere.  
43 Dass alle diese Toten so selbstverständlich sind. Wenn wir diese Zahlen akzeptieren, dann  
44 akzeptieren wir Gewalt.<sup>37</sup>  
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50 Accepting such violence is problematic because it ultimately limits our abilities to imagine a  
51 different, less violent future. By contrast, the denaturalizing function of the subjunctive,  
52 which stresses contingency instead of necessity, allows us to (re-)create and, in Eshel's  
53 words, 're-describe',<sup>38</sup> the past and the present as well as the future. This view does not  
54 promote historical relativism, since *Vielleicht Esther* does not convey the message that the  
55 Second World War and the Holocaust did not happen. Rather, the book highlights that  
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3 history could have gone differently. The shift in grammatical mood entails an important  
4 ethical message, namely that, while we cannot change the past, we have agency to imagine  
5 the possibility of a different outcome and explore alternative possibilities for the future. This  
6 implies an openness of/towards the future which lifts us from an entrapment in the past  
7 and the perpetual re-enactment of trauma implied by Hirsch's notion of 'rememory' (and,  
8 arguably, her idea of 'postmemory'). The awareness that history is contingent, and that the  
9 past should be approached as 'a set of possibilities',<sup>39</sup> thus functions as a reminder that an  
10 alternative, less violent future, is always possible. Petrowskaja's text takes the crisis of  
11 postmemorial witnessing as a starting point for formulating a new, subjunctive ethics of  
12 remembering, which relies on the powers of fictional (re-)creation to imagine not only what  
13 the past might have been like, but also what it could have been and still can be. While  
14 bringing justice to the past's forgotten and unredeemed aspects, *Vielleicht Esther* thus also  
15 urges us to take responsibility for the future.

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29 3. 'A Recollection of the Possible With a Critical Edge Against the Real'<sup>40</sup> – Subjunctive  
30 Holocaust Memory in *Die Hauptstadt*

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34 Unredeemed or unrealized possibilities of the past take centre stage in Robert Menasse's  
35 novel *Die Hauptstadt*, in which the transition from personal to institutionalized Holocaust  
36 memory is almost complete. The novel grapples not only with the crisis of the European  
37 project, but also with an overinstitutionalized Holocaust memory which has become  
38 formulaic and empty. The book interlocks the personal disintegration of Holocaust  
39 memories with a larger collective crisis in which the canonization and commodification of  
40 Holocaust memory have drained the event of all significance. In this context, *Die Hauptstadt*  
41 resorts to subjunctive constructions to revive the utopian possibilities initially implied in the  
42 slogan 'Never Again': according to two central characters in the book, the mantra was  
43 initially meant to ring in the end of nationalism in Europe as the only way to guarantee the  
44 universality and longevity of Human Rights. As a promise that has not yet been fulfilled, this  
45 alternative memory of the Holocaust, and the accompanying vision for Europe, draw on 'the  
46 past's unrealized possibilities' and seek to reinvest '[die] Floskel 'Nie wieder Auschwitz' (*DH*,  
47 330) with political urgency.<sup>41</sup>

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One of the novel's multiple plot lines centres on the Department of Culture and Education within the European Commission, which is orchestrating the Commission's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration as part of a sorely needed image campaign. One of its employees, Martin Susman, comes up with a daunting idea for the so-called 'Big Jubilee Project' after returning from a business trip to Auschwitz: 'Auschwitz als Geburtsort der Europäischen Kommission' (DH, 182). He identifies what he calls the supra- and ultimately post-national 'Gemeinsame' (DH, 184) as the originally intended but then forgotten (or wilfully suppressed?) utopian core of the European integration project, which is unthinkable without the experience of the Holocaust: 'Diese Erfahrung und die Einigkeit, dass sich dieses Verbrechen nie mehr wiederholen darf, haben das Projekt der Einigung Europas möglich gemacht [...]. Das ist die Idee! Die Überwindung des Nationalgefühls. Wir sind die Hüter dieser Idee!' (DH, 185). He has an unknown ally in the economics professor Alois Erhart who argues along similar lines, even though the two characters never consciously cross paths. While Susman's idea is at first enthusiastically embraced by his boss Fenia Xenopoulou, it is eventually crushed by the upper echelons of the EU bureaucracy since its implications are too radical. In a similar vein, Erhart completely discredits himself professionally when he presents his ideas at a meeting for the think tank 'New Pact for Europe'. Abolishing national borders and curbing the influence of nation states seems desirable from the perspective of deregulated global trade, but the novel illustrates that this implies neither the transcendence of nationalism and identity politics nor the abandonment of anxiously guarded geopolitical borders. By contrast, the novel seeks to reinstate the moral imperative behind the economic and political unification of Europe, insinuating that its border-crossing fiscal and trade policies are a derivative of a larger post-national ideal and not vice versa.

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Menasse's novel presents utopia as a 'method', to quote the sociologist Ruth Levitas, which is fuelled by 'the desire for being otherwise, individually and collectively, subjectively and objectively'.<sup>42</sup> In *Die Hauptstadt*, imagining this 'otherwise' requires 'a recollection of the possible',<sup>43</sup> i.e. a subjunctive memory of what Europe and the memory of the Holocaust could (and should) have been. However, the canonized and monumentalized state of Holocaust commemoration in the book is diametrically opposed to this subjunctive approach: this culture is exceptionally fixed and presented as immutable, and instead of pointing out alternative possibilities beyond the status quo it helps to perpetuate it. *Die Hauptstadt* presents this situation as the result of the decades-long institutionalization of

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3 Holocaust memory, which has paved the way for its instrumentalization, as initially  
4 exemplified by the 'Big Jubilee Project'. The idea of using the Holocaust, and particularly the  
5 slogan 'Never Again', to boost the image of the European commission is only feasible  
6 because there is by now a widely shared and approved interpretation of the event, at least  
7 in the West, which helps to cement an oftentimes redemptory narrative. As Amos Goldberg  
8 has noted, adhering to this consensus generates moral capital; Holocaust memory becomes  
9 'a global mirror before which individuals and societies define themselves as belonging to the  
10 society of decent people'.<sup>44</sup> This consolidating function of Holocaust memory is illustrated in  
11 the following exchange between two senior EU officials:  
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20 'Nie wieder Auschwitz' ist gut und richtig.

21 Ja.

22 Das könnt ihr jeden Sonntag in einer Rede sagen.

23 Ja, damit man es nicht vergisst. Niemals vergessen, das muss man immer wieder sagen.

24 Genau. Aber das ist kein politisches Programm.

25 Moral war noch nie ein politisches Programm.

26 Vor allem, wenn die Moral Konflikte produziert (DH, 330).  
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35 The emptiness of the slogan 'Never Again' is here matched by the repetitive nature of the  
36 exchange between the politicians. Ironically, the endless repetition of the phrase 'Never  
37 Again' seems to enhance forgetting rather than halt it, as the quasi-religious mantra has  
38 replaced any serious engagement with the event. The dominance of the formula directs  
39 attention away from ongoing instances of violence, such as, for example, the so-called  
40 refugee crisis or the resurgence of nationalism and xenophobia, which are thematized in  
41 Menasse's novel. This is a direct result of the de-actualization and depoliticization of  
42 Holocaust memory that accompanies its canonization. The slogan 'Never Again' produces a  
43 musealized form of Holocaust memory which is completely cut off from the actual concerns  
44 of the present moment and can thus be used to bolster a certain self-image as 'the society  
45 of decent people' and perpetuate the status quo. Susman's and Erhart's approaches  
46 threaten to topple this stabilizing narrative, as they aim to reinfuse the moralizing formula  
47 of 'Never Again' with political urgency.  
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3 This figurative musealization of the Holocaust corresponds with its actual  
4 musealization and commodification, which become obvious during Martin Susman's trip to  
5 Auschwitz. He is forced to visit the former concentration camp in his role as an EU official on  
6 the occasion of *International Holocaust Memorial Day*. The site has become so steeped in  
7 ritual as well as the routines of memory tourism that the violence it once harboured seems  
8 to have been eclipsed. This loss of historical specificity has grotesque effects: upon his  
9 arrival at the camp, Susman receives a badge which marks him as a 'Guest of Honour in  
10 Auschwitz' and he is reminded: 'Verlieren Sie diese Karte nicht. Im Verlustfall haben Sie  
11 keine Aufenthaltsberechtigung im Lager' (*DH*, 170). Entering the former concentration camp  
12 has turned from an almost certain death sentence into a privilege that needs to be  
13 regulated via access badges. The musealization of Auschwitz also creates a problem with  
14 empathy, as the reliance of prefabricated frames of reference produces numbness and  
15 hinders any thorough engagement with the site as such, as Susman notes: 'Aber die  
16 Musealisierung tötet den Tod und das Wiedererkennen verhindert den Schock des  
17 Erkennens' (*DH*, 136).

18  
19 The contrast between 'Wiedererkennen' and 'Erkennen' also points to the issue of  
20 hypermediation, which is the third facet of canonized Holocaust memory in the text. Tropes  
21 and references to the Holocaust have become so ubiquitous, decontextualized and free-  
22 floating that they can emerge in virtually any setting: the absurdity of this is illustrated by a  
23 major scandal caused by an exhibition on 'Kunst auf dem Abstellgleis' (*DH*, 403). The curator  
24 interprets the title quite literally, using actual train tracks to embed the forgotten art works  
25 featured in the exhibition. One critic interprets this as an impious reference to the selection  
26 ramp at Auschwitz, sparking a debate about the curator's 'Verharmlosung von Auschwitz'  
27 (*DH*, 405).

28  
29 Menasse's novel contrasts this hollowed-out memory of the event with personal,  
30 biographical memories, on the one hand, and a subjunctive, or even utopian, memory of the  
31 event on the other. Personal memories of the Holocaust are represented by the character of  
32 David de Vriend, one of the last – maybe even *the* last – Holocaust survivor(s) in the novel  
33 who spends the remainder of his life in a retirement home in Brussels, alone and forgotten,  
34 slowly descending into dementia. De Vriend suffers not only from the fact that he is  
35 forgetting his life experiences – he also has no-one he could transmit his fading memories  
36 to. This is partially due to personal choice, as de Vriend has opted for suppressing rather



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3 than passing on his memories. However, his character also comments on the broader,  
4 institutionalized culture of Holocaust remembrance, in which the dominance of highly  
5 symbolic, universalizable modes of remembrance occludes the particularities of individual  
6 stories of survival. This tension becomes palpable when the organizers of the 'Big Jubilee  
7 Project' plan to invite the last survivors to their ceremony, so that they may testify to the  
8 barbarity of the Nazi crimes and the importance of the ethics of 'Never Again'. However,  
9 when trying to determine the exact number of survivors still alive, the group runs into  
10 problems, as there is no central data base that holds all their names – numbering Jews has  
11 for good reasons gone out of fashion after the Holocaust, as one of the team members  
12 remarks (*DH*, 243). More importantly though, the multiple and entangled pathways of  
13 survival defy official records and statistics; they would have to be approached via  
14 empathetic listening in the space of the personal encounter, i.e. the exact opposite of the  
15 purely numerical approach taken by the project organizers. These spaces of empathetic  
16 listening are being destroyed in a culture of Holocaust hypermediation though, as the  
17 example of de Vriend illustrates – the organizers are interested in him as an icon of survival,  
18 i.e. in the universality of his story, and not in the particularities of his path through life.  
19 Ironically, de Vriend actually creates a list with the names of all those who survived  
20 Auschwitz with him (so potentially the list the EU department is looking for), but it becomes  
21 clear that this unofficial archive will die with him – all he will leave is 'eine Leerstelle', which  
22 will indexically point to the fact 'dass da etwas gewesen ist, was nicht mehr da war' (*DH*,  
23 37), but leave open and irretrievable what has actually been lost.

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Menasse's novel hence stages a situation in which the collective and personal  
techniques of chronicling, preservation and witnessing are failing. The chains of inter- and  
transgenerational transmission are broken in *Die Hauptstadt*, and rather than safeguard the  
last personal memories, the cultural institutions of Holocaust commemoration efface them,  
as empathetic spaces for listening and engagement are replaced by the dominance of  
slogans and numbers. Menasse's novel thus appears deeply sceptical, maybe even hopeless,  
about Holocaust memory in the new millennium: personal memories will be irretrievably  
lost, whereas the official discourse has become encrusted in empty routines and formulas.  
However, in keeping with its programme of subjunctive remembering, *Die Hauptstadt*  
emphasizes that the intertwined crises of Holocaust memory and of Europe are not the  
inescapable result of this particular (his-)story and do not have to determine the future.

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3 What has led to this state of affairs is not historical necessity, but a crisis of the imagination,  
4 caused by what the author Menasse, in his polemic *Der Europäische Landbote*, calls  
5 'Zukunftsblindheit'.<sup>45</sup> This particular form of blindness is characterized by 'die Unfähigkeit,  
6 im Status quo die Dynamiken zu erkennen, die zwingend über diesen hinausdrängen'.<sup>46</sup> In  
7 his study *Foregone Conclusions*, the English and Comparative Literature scholar Michael  
8 André Bernstein, criticizes apocalyptic practices of (Holocaust-)historiography that rely on  
9 what he calls 'backshadowing' and 'foreshadowing'.<sup>47</sup> While 'backshadowing' describes a  
10 deterministic view of history, claiming that historical developments have necessarily and  
11 unavoidably led to the present moment, 'foreshadowing' concerns the future, as a  
12 'technique whose [...] logic must always value the present, not for itself, but as the  
13 harbinger of an already determined future'.<sup>48</sup> This is the 'Zukunftsblindheit' that both the  
14 author Menasse and the character of Alois Erhart criticize: 'Wenn sie [the lobbyists, MRL]  
15 von der Zukunft redeten, dann redeten sie von einer möglichst reibungslosen Verlängerung  
16 der Gegenwart und nicht von der Zukunft. Das verstanden sie nicht, weil sie glaubten, die  
17 Zukunft bestehe aus den Trends, die sich unaufhaltsam durchsetzten' (*DH*, 300).<sup>49</sup>

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Against this deterministic view of the past and the future, Bernstein promotes the  
notion of 'sideshadowing' which pays 'attention to the unfulfilled or unrealized possibilities  
of the past',<sup>50</sup> thus

[...] disrupting the affirmation of a triumphalist, unidirectional view of history in which  
whatever has perished is condemned [...]. Against foreshadowing, sideshadowing  
champions the incommensurability of the concrete moment and refuses the tyranny of all  
synthetic master-schemes [...], sideshadowing stresses the significance of random,  
haphazard, and unassimilable contingencies, [...].<sup>51</sup>

By thus saving the past from deterministic reductionism, 'sideshadowing' also establishes  
the openness of the future, which accounts for its utopian potential: 'utopian thinking is in  
itself a form of sideshadowing, a permanent awareness that things might be different, that  
the present state of affairs and the future toward which people seem to be tending are not  
the only possible ones'.<sup>52</sup>

What becomes obvious here is the link between memory, 'sideshadowing' and utopia as  
a subjunctive 'method', which allows us to activate and exercise what Bernstein, borrowing

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3 from Musil's *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*,<sup>53</sup> calls the 'Möglichkeitssinn'.<sup>54</sup> *Die Hauptstadt*  
4 calls for a 'sideshadowing' or subjunctive approach to Holocaust memory which takes as its  
5 starting point 'unfulfilled or unrealized possibilities of the past', namely what Susman and  
6 Erhart see as the utopian core of the slogan 'Never Again' and the 'Big Jubilee Project'.  
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8 While the project initially frames the Holocaust as a negative founding memory for the  
9  
10 European project, thus following a widely accepted narrative,<sup>55</sup> Martin Susman draws some  
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12 radical conclusions from this: he reads the Holocaust as the ultimate outpouring of violent  
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14 nationalism, while also interpreting it as an experience that did away with national  
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16 boundaries and therefore created an undeniable post-national commonality:  
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21 Die Opfer kamen aus allen Ländern Europas, sie trugen alle dieselbe gestreifte Kleidung, sie  
22 lebten alle im Schatten desselben Todes, und sie alle hatten, so sie überlebten, denselben  
23 Wunsch, nämlich die für alle Zukunft geltende Garantie der Anerkennung der  
24 Menschenrechte. Nichts in der Geschichte hat die verschiedenen Identitäten, Mentalitäten  
25 und Kulturen Europas, die Religionen, die verschiedenen so genannten Rassen und ehemals  
26 verfeindete Weltanschauungen so verbunden, nichts hat eine so fundamentale  
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28 Gemeinsamkeit aller Menschen geschaffen wie die Erfahrung von Auschwitz (*DH*, 184-185).  
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36 In Susman's eyes, to honour this commonality and truly guarantee that such atrocities never  
37 again repeat themselves, the EU must become a supranational institution, with the ultimate  
38 aim of abolishing concepts of national belonging and of the nation state. For him, this is the  
39 only way to safeguard a true universality of Human Rights (*DH*, 185). This is the yet  
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41 unrealized potential of the slogan 'Never Again', i.e. what the memory of the Holocaust and  
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43 the resulting European project could have been and can still become.<sup>56</sup>  
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47 Ironically, the 'Big Jubilee Project' initially promotes an unproductive notion of  
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49 universalism – the empty and widely accepted formula of 'Never Again' – but,  
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51 unintentionally, arrives at a radical conclusion, turning both Susman and Erhart into  
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53 unwitting revolutionaries. The first kind of universalism consolidates certain identity  
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55 constructs and the status quo, hence perpetuating an exclusionary logic – as stated by  
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57 Goldberg, participation in the ethics of 'Never Again' becomes a yardstick for civilization and  
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59 moral decency, often coinciding with a Western (European) narrative of working through  
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the past and thereby achieving historical and moral progress. Opposed to that is a different

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3 kind of universalism driving Susman's and Erhart's attempts, who both highlight the shared  
4 bond of what Michael Rothberg calls 'implication' –<sup>57</sup> i.e. an understanding of history that  
5 connects past and present, individuals and collectives, and various nations via the often-  
6 times invisible cultural, psychological and economic after-effects of large-scale trauma.  
7  
8 'Implicated' modes of relation to the past may include 'bystanders, beneficiaries, latecomers  
9 of the postmemory generation and others connected "prosthethically" to pasts they did not  
10 directly experience'.<sup>58</sup> As such, the commonality is not artificially created and imposed from  
11 above to sustain identity constructs, but a necessary result of the messy and often  
12 involuntary entanglements of history. According to Rothberg, an 'implicated' perspective  
13 acknowledges that 'the conditions of possibility of violence' still persist,<sup>59</sup> which is why it  
14 urges us to (re-)examine the past, so as to critically confront our present and take  
15 responsibility for the future. It is not consolidating but transformative.

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25 'Implication' is thus the basis for what Susman and Erhart term 'das Gemeinsame',  
26 understood as a post-national commonality, expressing the fact that we cannot neatly  
27 separate the past, present and future, or the various national (after-)histories and memories  
28 of the Holocaust in Europe. When Susman thus claims that 'Auschwitz ist überall' (*DH*, 171),  
29 he does not refer to the ubiquity of canonized narratives about the past and hypermediated  
30 references and tropes. Rather, he is saying that we are steeped, or rather 'implicated', in  
31 histories whether we like it or not – in Erhart's words: 'Es gibt in Europa kein Niemandland  
32 mehr, keinen Quadratmeter Boden, der keine Geschichte hat' (*DH*, 394).

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*Die Hauptstadt* is thus an 'exercise in speculation' on multiple levels: it activates an  
unredeemed aspect of the past, asking its readers to imagine a different culture of  
Holocaust memory and a post-national Europe, while also inviting them to exercise – also in  
the sense of train – their 'Möglichkeitssinn'. The fact that these ideas are (re-)presented by  
two characters who are cast as 'Spinner' is only logical,<sup>60</sup> for those who challenge the  
pragmatist-realist mind-set have always been categorized as dreamers at best and lunatics  
at worst – or as poets, as Menasse highlights:

Ich könnte von Novalis herauf noch Dutzende solcher Zitate aufzeigen, die zeigen, dass die  
Dichter weiter gedacht haben als die politischen Pragmatiker; Beweise dafür, dass das, was  
zeitgeistig als verrückt – oder höflicher formuliert: als utopisch galt, einer nachhaltigen

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3 Vernunft gehorchte, während die Pragmatiker jedes Mal ganz pragmatisch mit der  
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5 jeweiligen Welt untergingen, über die sie nicht hinaus gehen konnten.<sup>61</sup>  
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9 This quote highlights the fact that 'exercises is speculation' are quintessentially literary  
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11 exercises, both in the sense that fiction provides a space in which alternative pathways of  
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13 the past and for the future can be imagined, but also because fiction requires us to flex our  
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15 speculative muscles, as it requires us to translate letters on a page into entire worlds, using  
16  
17 our imagination. Bernstein argues that 'fiction is precisely what can reject fixity, and it offers  
18  
19 the most unqualified enactment of our longing for fluid possibilities and limitless  
20  
21 sideshadows'.<sup>62</sup>

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23 Menasse's text masterfully illustrates these 'fluid possibilities' of fiction: *Die*  
24  
25 *Hauptstadt* is shaped by a multi-perspectival and 'polyphonic' narrative which focusses on  
26  
27 six main and several side characters and continuously oscillates between their various  
28  
29 viewpoints.<sup>63</sup> This not only allows several perspectives (and possibilities) to co-exist on the  
30  
31 same temporal plane without privileging one of them, it also results in a non-linear, criss-  
32  
33 crossing narrative, marked by contingencies, fluid connections and non-conscious overlaps.  
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35 As a result, the Holocaust emerges less as a consolidating, negative founding myth but  
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37 rather as a shared, truly European event. Most of the characters in the novel, who come  
38  
39 from all across Europe, have a family or personal history that somehow involves the Nazi  
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41 past, and in several cases conditions their actions and responses in the present. However,  
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43 these links only become obvious to the reader who witnesses all of the novel's multiple  
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45 story lines. It is the reader who can see the entanglements or hidden pathways of  
46  
47 'implication' between the various characters, which find expression in the novel's prominent  
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49 theme of 'Zusammenhänge' (*DH*, 14) or 'Verknüpfung' (*DH*, 100): not only do all of the  
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51 characters quite literally cross paths at some point, the novel's use of focalization also  
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53 produces overlaps between their respective viewpoints, when the same scene is, for  
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55 example, first recounted from the perspective of one character and then from the position  
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57 of another. Furthermore, the novel shows us that the characters' histories are  
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59 quintessentially entangled, in most cases without their knowledge: after escaping the  
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61 famous twentieth convoy to Auschwitz, David de Vriend joins the Belgian resistance group  
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63 'Europe libre' which is spearheaded by Jean-Richard Brunfaut, who turns out to be the  
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65 grandfather of one of the other characters in the book and an early pioneer of a European

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3 rather than nationally-focused resistance and liberation movement (*DH*, 355). Brunfaut  
4 Junior and de Vriend cross paths only fleetingly in the novel, completely unaware of their  
5 connection, but the reader can see how their present lives are shaped by the past and  
6 implicated in one another.  
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10 The novel's extensive use of both narrative and situational irony can be interpreted  
11 as yet another manifestation of 'sideshadowing', as irony is a form of double speak that  
12 always carries within what is said the potentiality of that which is not being said. The  
13 German expression 'uneigentliches Sprechen' for rhetorical tropes such as irony hints at  
14 this, as it qualifies irony as a mode of expression in which two levels – 'das Eigentliche' and  
15 das 'Uneigentliche' – intersect, so that it creates bifurcations, just like the subjunctive  
16 approach. While Menasse's novel is therefore not as hopeless as it initially appears, the text  
17 is adamant that, at this stage, alternative visions for the future are confined to the realm of  
18 literature, which, due to its specific capabilities, can counter the dangerous pragmatism of  
19 day-to-day politics.  
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#### 31 4. Conclusion: A New Culture of Holocaust (Post-)Memory? 32

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34 Although different in terms of genre and style, *Vielleicht Esther* and *Die Hauptstadt* both  
35 respond to crises of remembering and witnessing the Holocaust after the end of living  
36 memory. In Petrowskaja's text, this crisis is connected to a family memory marred by the  
37 Holocaust, whose gaps the narrator cannot fill for a number of reasons: not only are there  
38 no more people, 'die man fragen kann' (*VE*, 30), the records of her Jewish family's suffering  
39 have also been skewed and/or destroyed as a result of the specific mnemopolitics of the  
40 (post-)Soviet era which left little space for Jewish suffering. As a response, she resorts to the  
41 subjunctive mood to negotiate the relationship between inaccessible facts and fiction, to  
42 account for the forgotten and suppressed aspects of personal and collective history and to  
43 're-describe' these archives for the future. Moving beyond family memory, Menasse's novel  
44 presents a situation in which the Holocaust has become so canonized and institutionalized  
45 that the slogan 'Never Again' has turned into a 'Floskel' (*DH*, 330) which is used to  
46 consolidate the status quo, but not to challenge ongoing and/or prevent future violence.  
47 Against this, a subjunctive counter-discourse is established in the realm of fiction which  
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3 seeks to revive the utopian impetus behind the statement 'Never Again' in the shape of a  
4 post-national Europe.  
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7 Subjunctive memories thus emerge as an important and underexamined strategy,  
8 employed by contemporary Jewish authors who try to negotiate the present and future  
9 shapes of Holocaust memory amidst the dying out of the survivor generation and the  
10 increasing hypermediation of Holocaust memory. As such, it may well transcend the realm  
11 of German-Jewish literature and point towards cultures of 'postmemory' more generally, as  
12 an ethical mode of indirect witnessing that breaks not only with deterministic notions of  
13 history, but also with the traumatic determinism haunting Hirsch's (and other) model(s) of  
14 transgenerational memory transfer. Subjunctive forms of remembering form part of a larger  
15 ethical programme which, in the case of Petrowskaja, aims to (re-)affirm positionality,  
16 reflexivity and 'futuraity', and in the case of Menasse intends to take us out of the rut of  
17 'Vergangenheitsbewirtschaftung',<sup>64</sup> by re-investing Holocaust memory with political urgency  
18 for the present moment. As such, subjunctive approaches have the potential to challenge  
19 and transform dominant accounts of transgenerational Holocaust memory, which explicitly  
20 and implicitly frame the transfer of memories across generations as a form of traumatic  
21 repetition. By approaching history in the subjunctive mood, according to the principles of  
22 'sideshadowing', both texts reject such determinism in favour of contingency, emphasizing  
23 that the future is neither a 'Verlängerung' nor a repetition of the past or the present, but  
24 quintessentially open. Menasse's text in particular questions the usefulness of perceiving  
25 history in terms of (traumatic) repetition, making it our task to avoid the catastrophes to  
26 come. *Die Hauptstadt* stresses that 'Never Again' has not helped prevent atrocity, as is  
27 demonstrated by textual references to the so-called refugee crisis, terrorist attacks and  
28 wide-spread islamophobia. Rather than live in fear of the eternal return of the past, we  
29 need to focus on building better futures, but this is only possible if we understand that  
30 history does not necessarily repeat itself and that other opportunities are always available –  
31 that is if we are brave or, rather, mad enough to seize them.  
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34 Although *Vielleicht Esther* and *Die Hauptstadt* are deeply concerned with Holocaust  
35 trauma and do not denigrate the devastation and suffering that comes with it, they  
36 nevertheless use subjunctive constructions to promote 'futuraity' and move beyond the  
37 'traumatic paradigm',<sup>65</sup> challenging the dominant notion that 'cultures of memory – and the  
38 study of memory – are set for the foreseeable future to be about the bad stuff'.<sup>66</sup> In  
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Petrowskaja's text this openness arguably corresponds with the willingness to widen the circle of those who are allowed and encouraged to remember the narrator's lost relatives. By destabilizing the biological family as the main framework for the transmission of memories, alternative horizons for the continuation and preservation of these memories are opened up. In Menasse's text, this openness might paradoxically be signified by the novel's closing words: *Die Hauptstadt* ends with the phrase 'À Suivre' [italics in the original, MRL] (DH, 459), which translates as 'to be continued', signalling that even the novel's disastrous ending – a terrorist attack in Brussels kills almost all of the novel's main protagonists and gives rise to large-scale islamophobic sentiment – is not the end.

However, both texts confine the utopianism of subjunctive memories to the realm of fiction. They highlight the intimate connection between subjunctive remembering and literary discourse, as both rely on the powers of the imagination. Their scepticism about official political and memorial discourse is thus accompanied by a staunch belief in the powers and importance of fiction to shape and transform current and future memory debates. If we are to believe Menasse, fictional accounts may well provide the only spaces in which alternative visions for a better future can be developed and tested out. At the same time, the logic of 'sideshadowing' posits that the future is always open and that things might change at any moment; we can therefore not rule out that these literary fantasies will one day become political realities.

<sup>1</sup> 'Robert Menasse erhält den Deutschen Buchpreis 2017', [www.deutscher-buchpreis.de](http://www.deutscher-buchpreis.de), 9 October 2017, <<https://www.deutscher-buchpreis.de/news/eintrag/robert-menasse-erhaelt-den-deutschen-buchpreis-2017/>> [accessed 30 November 2018].

<sup>2</sup> Ansgar Graw, "'Was kümmert mich das Wörtliche'", *welt.de*, 23 December 2018 <<https://www.welt.de/kultur/article186002284/Robert-Menasse-hat-Zitate-erfunden-Was-kuemert-mich-das-Woertliche.html>> [accessed 14 January 2018].

<sup>3</sup> Martin Reeh, "'Das Buch steht in Brüssel'", *taz.de*, 11 January 2019 <<http://www.taz.de/!5561377/>> [accessed 14 January 2018].

<sup>4</sup> Graw.

<sup>5</sup> Jenni Adams, 'Relationships to Realism in Post-Holocaust Fiction: Conflicted Realism and the Counterfactual Historical Novel', in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Holocaust Literature*, ed. by Jenni Adams (London et al.: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 81-101 (p. 93).

<sup>6</sup> Gary Weissman, *Fantasies of Witnessing. Postwar Efforts to Experience the Holocaust* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory. Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2012); Marianne Hirsch, 'The Generation of Postmemory', *Poetics Today*, 29.1 (2008), 103-128.

<sup>8</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames. Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 22.

<sup>9</sup> Attempts to approach these generations and their artistic outputs more systematically have been made by



- Victoria Aarons (ed.), *Third-Generation Holocaust Narratives. Memory in Memoir and Fiction* (Lanham, MD et al.: Lexington Books, 2016); Victoria Aarons and Alan L. Berger, *Third-Generation Holocaust Representation. Trauma, History, and Memory* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2017); Esther Jilovsky, *Remembering the Holocaust: Generations, Witnessing and Place* (London and New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015); Esther Jilovsky, Jordana Silverstein and David Slucki (eds.), *In the Shadow of Memory. The Holocaust and the Third Generation* (London and Portland, OR: Vallentine Mitchell, 2016).
- <sup>10</sup> See for example Torben Fischer, Philipp Hammermeister and Sven Kramer (eds.), *Der Nationalsozialismus und die Shoah in der deutschsprachigen Gegenwartsliteratur* (Amsterdam and New York, NY: Rodopi, 2014); Erin McGlothlin and Jennifer M. Kapczynski (eds.), *Persistent Legacy. The Holocaust and German Studies* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2016); Moritz Schramm, 'Perspektivisches Erinnern. Der Nationalsozialismus und seine Folgen in der jüngeren deutschen Gegenwartsliteratur', in *Gegenwart Schreiben. Zur deutschen Literatur 2000-2015*, ed. by Corinna Caduff and Ulrike Vedder (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2017), pp. 15-25; Katja Garloff and Agnes Müller (eds.), *German-Jewish Literature after 1990* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2018).
- <sup>11</sup> Weissman, p. 5.
- <sup>12</sup> Katja Petrowskaja, *Vielleicht Esther* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2014). Henceforth cited in the text as *VE*.
- <sup>13</sup> Robert Menasse, *Die Hauptstadt* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2017). Henceforth cited in the text as *DH*.
- <sup>14</sup> See Maya Caspari, "'There Are No 'Other' People": A Conversation with Katja Petrowskaja', *lareviewofbooks.org*, 7 March 2018 <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/there-are-no-other-people-a-conversation-with-katja-petrowskaja/>> [accessed 30 October 2018]. See also Maya Caspari, 'Subjunctive Remembering in Katja Petrowskaja's *Vielleicht Esther*', in *Minority Discourses in Germany since 1990: Intersections, Interventions, Interpolations*, ed. by Ela Gezen, Priscilla Layne and Jonathan Skolnik (Oxford and New York, NY: Berghahn, forthcoming).
- <sup>15</sup> *Family Frames*, p. 22.
- <sup>16</sup> Both Amir Eshel and Leslie Adelson have advanced debates on 'futurity' in recent German and literary studies, although they operate with slightly different understandings of the term; this article follows Eshel's understanding of the concept; see Leslie Adelson, *Cosmic Miniatures and the Future Sense. Alexander Kluge's 21st-Century Literary Experiments in German Culture and Narrative Form* (Berlin and Boston, MA: de Gruyter, 2017); Amir Eshel, *Futurity. Contemporary Literature and the Quest for the Past* (Chicago, IL and London: University of Chicago Press, 2012).
- <sup>17</sup> "'There Are No 'Other' People'".
- <sup>18</sup> Eshel, p. 9.
- <sup>19</sup> Kirstin Frieden, *Neuverhandlungen des Holocaust. Mediale Transformationen des Gedächtnisparadigmas* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2014), p. 35.
- <sup>20</sup> Work in this direction is currently being undertaken by Elizabeth Loentz, see Elizabeth Loentz, 'Counterfactualism in Contemporary German Jewish Fiction: Katja Petrowskaja's *Maybe Esther: A Family Story* (2014) and Jenny Erpenbeck's *The End of Days* (2010)', conference paper presented at *the Association for Jewish Studies Annual Conference* (Boston, Massachusetts, 16-19 December 2018).
- <sup>21</sup> Jenni Adams, *Magic Realism in Holocaust Literature. Troping the Traumatic Real* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).
- <sup>22</sup> See for example Maxim Biller, *Im Kopf von Bruno Schulz* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer&Witsch, 2013); Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything is Illuminated* (London et al.: Penguin, 2002); David Grossman, *See Under: Love* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1989); Nicole Krauss, *The History of Love* (London et al.: Penguin, 2006); Benjamin Stein, *Das Alphabet des Jüdischen* (Munich: dtv, 1998); Benjamin Stein, *Die Leinwand* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2010).
- <sup>23</sup> Michael Chabon, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (New York, NY et al.: HarperCollins, 2007); Timur Vermes, *Er ist wieder da* (Cologne: Eichborn Verlag, 2012).
- <sup>24</sup> Adams, p. 84.
- <sup>25</sup> Ann Rigney, 'Remembering Hope: Transnational Activism Beyond the Traumatic', *Memory Studies*, 11.3 (2018), 368-380 (p. 369).
- <sup>26</sup> Alejandro Baer and Natan Sznaider, *Memory and Forgetting in the Post-Holocaust Era. The Ethics of Never Again* (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2017), p. 132. In a similar vein to Rigney, Baer and Sznaider seek to overcome the traumatic paradigm, by investigating the ways in which the afterlives of the Holocaust and ethics of 'Never Again' act not as a deterrent but as catalysts for (future) activism.
- <sup>27</sup> On the notions of loss and pain in Petrowskaja's book and how they relate to language and multilingualism see Annette Bühler-Dietrich, "'Hast du nicht alle zu Hause" – Sprache und Gleichgewicht in Katja

- Petrowskaja's *Vielleicht Esther*, in *Affektivität und Mehrsprachigkeit. Dynamiken in der deutschsprachigen (Gegenwarts-)Literatur*, ed. by Marion Acker, Anne Fleig, Matthias Lüthjohann (Tübingen: Narr 2019), pp. 225-246. On translanguaging in Petrowskaja see Godela Weiss-Sussex, "'... dass diese tauben Geschichten aufflattern': Narrative, Translingual Creativity and Belonging in Katja Petrowskaja, *Vielleicht Esther* (2014), *Modern Languages Open* (forthcoming).
- <sup>28</sup> Henri Raczymow and Alan Astro, 'Memory Shot Through With Holes', *Yale French Studies*, 85 (1994), 98-105.
- <sup>29</sup> *Family Frames*, p. 13.
- <sup>30</sup> For an excellent analysis of representations and discourses of the archive in Petrowskaja's text see Dora Osborne, 'Encountering the Archive in Katja Petrowskaja's *Vielleicht Esther*', *Seminar*, 52.3 (2016), 255-72.
- <sup>31</sup> On the (non-)commemoration of Babij Jar see Jessica Rapson, 'Babi Yar: Transcultural Memories of Atrocity from Kiev to Denver', in *The Transcultural Turn: Interrogating Memory between and beyond Borders*, ed. by Lucy Bond and Jessica Rapson (Berlin und Boston, MA: Walter de Gruyter, 2014), pp. 139-161; Jessica Rapson, *Topographies of Suffering: Buchenwald, Babi Yar, Lidice* (New York und Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2015).
- <sup>32</sup> *Family Frames*, p. 22.
- <sup>33</sup> *The Generation of Postmemory*, pp. 82-83.
- <sup>34</sup> Jonathan Long for example criticizes the epistemological and ethical privileging of later generations in Hirsch's work, see Jonathan Long, 'Monika Maron's *Pawels Briefe*. Photography, Narrative, and the Claims of Postmemory', in *German Memory Contests. The Quest for Identity in Literature, Film, and Discourse since 1990*, ed. by Anne Fuchs, Mary Cosgrove and Georg Grote (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2006), pp. 147-165.
- <sup>35</sup> Weissman, p. 5.
- <sup>36</sup> Holger Heimann, 'Familiensaga im Kontext des Zweiten Weltkriegs', *deutschlandfunk.de*, 12 May 2014 <[http://www.deutschlandfunk.de/katja-petrowskaja-familiensaga-im-kontext-des-zweiten.700.de.html?dram:article\\_id=285117](http://www.deutschlandfunk.de/katja-petrowskaja-familiensaga-im-kontext-des-zweiten.700.de.html?dram:article_id=285117)> [accessed 10 January 2019].
- <sup>37</sup> 'Familiensaga im Kontext des Zweiten Weltkriegs'.
- <sup>38</sup> Eshel, p. 4.
- <sup>39</sup> "'There Are No 'Other' People'".
- <sup>40</sup> The sub-title refers to a famous quote from Theodor W. Adorno on the utopian potential of art: 'Art's Utopia, the counterfactual yet-to-come, is draped in black. It goes on being a recollection of the possible with a critical edge against the real; it is a kind of imaginary restitution of that catastrophe which is world history; it is freedom which did not come to pass under the spell of necessity and which may well not come to pass ever at all', see Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. and transl. by Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 196.
- <sup>41</sup> Baer and Sznajder, p. 3.
- <sup>42</sup> See Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method. The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. xi. Building on her study on *The Concept of Utopia*, Levitas discusses various conceptions of utopia, arriving at a broad definition of utopia as 'the expression of a desire for a better way of being or of living' (p. xii). See also Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011).
- <sup>43</sup> Adorno, p. 196.
- <sup>44</sup> Amos Goldberg, 'Ethics, Identity and Antifundamental Fundamentalism. Holocaust Memory in the Global Age', in *Marking Evil. Holocaust Memory in the Global Age*, ed. by Amos Goldberg and Haim Hazan (New York, NY and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2015), pp. 3-29 (pp. 8-9).
- <sup>45</sup> Robert Menasse, *Der Europäische Landbote. Die Wut der Bürger und der Friede Europas*. (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2015). Taking inspiration from Georg Büchner's revolutionary pamphlet *Der Hessische Landbote* (1834), Menasse makes the case for radically reforming the political system of Europe, anticipating many of the points that the character of Alois Erhart makes in *Die Hauptstadt*, which in many ways serves as a fictionalization of Menasse's earlier political text.
- <sup>46</sup> *Der Europäische Landbote*, p. 89.
- <sup>47</sup> Michael André Bernstein, *Foregone Conclusions. Against Apocalyptic History* (Berkeley, CA et al.: University of California Press, 1994).
- <sup>48</sup> Bernstein, p. 2.
- <sup>49</sup> Similarly, the author Menasse contests an attitude 'in der Dynamik der Situation nicht das Wünschenswerte [sieht], das es zu erreichen gilt, sie macht sich nur fest an dem, was verloren ging. Auch für die Kritiker ist der Status quo ein Krisenszenario, und sie wollen den Status quo retten vor der Zukunft, statt ihn in der Zukunft zu erlösen', see *Der Europäische Landbote*, p. 90.

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- <sup>50</sup> Bernstein, p. 3. Apparently, Bernstein takes the concept of sideshadowing from Gary Saul Morson, *Narrative and Freedom* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1994). I thank the anonymous peer-reviewers for pointing this out to me.
- <sup>51</sup> Bernstein, p. 4.
- <sup>52</sup> Bernstein, p. 105.
- <sup>53</sup> It is certainly no coincidence that *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* provides a major intertext for Menasse's novel. Musil's book is not only mentioned explicitly in *Die Hauptstadt*, there are also structural parallels between for example the 'Big Jubilee Project' and the so-called 'Parallellaktion' in Musil's text.
- <sup>54</sup> Bernstein, p. 105.
- <sup>55</sup> On the Holocaust as a negative founding myth see for example Aleida Assmann, *Das neue Unbehagen an der Erinnerungskultur. Eine Intervention* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2013).
- <sup>56</sup> It remains questionable to what extent this new Europe would also take into account the continent's long history of colonialism and thus invite those to participate who do not belong to the current geopolitical outline of Europe but are certainly integral to its history. This seems to be the gist of the 'European Balcony Project', co-founded by Menasse, which tries to make the utopian idea of a European republic a political reality: 'We recognize that Europe's wealth is based on the exploitation of other continents and the suppression of other cultures over centuries. For that reason, we are happy to share our territory with those whom we have driven from theirs. Anyone who wishes to can be a European. The European Republic is the first step on the path to a global democracy'. See <<https://europeanbalconyproject.eu/en/manifesto>> [accessed 14 January 2019].
- <sup>57</sup> Michael Rothberg, 'Multidirectional Memory and the Implicated Subject', in *Performing Memory in Art and Popular Culture*, ed. by Liedeke Plate and Anneke Smelik (New York, NY und London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 39-58.
- <sup>58</sup> 'Multidirectional Memory', p. 40.
- <sup>59</sup> Rothberg, Michael, 'Trauma Theory, Implicated Subjects, and the Question of Israel/Palestine', *Profession*, 2 May 2014 <<https://profession.commons.mla.org/2014/05/02/trauma-theory-implicated-subjects-and-the-question-of-israelpalestine/>> [accessed 20 February 2019].
- <sup>60</sup> Paul Ingendaay, "'Nie Wieder Realismus'", *www.faz.net*, 22 August 2018 <<https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/debatten/eu-plaedoyer-von-robert-menasse-nie-wieder-realismus-15749135.html>> [accessed 10 February 2019].
- <sup>61</sup> *Der Europäische Landbote*, p. 111.
- <sup>62</sup> Bernstein, p. 112.
- <sup>63</sup> See Bakhtin's concept of 'polyphony' which, along with his notions of 'dialogism' and 'interillumination', can be usefully applied to *Die Hauptstadt*: Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays*, ed. by Michael Holquist, transl. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 259-422, Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Epic and Novel. Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays*, ed. by Michael Holquist, transl. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 3-40, Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and transl. by Caryl Emerson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).
- <sup>64</sup> Mary Cosgrove, *Born under Auschwitz. Melancholy Traditions in Postwar German Literature* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2014), p. 185.
- <sup>65</sup> Rigney, p. 369.
- <sup>66</sup> Rigney, p. 369.