Generational Shifts: Representing Post-Wende Berlin

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Cultural History and Collective Remembering
The emergence of the so-called Berlin novel since German reunification has been widely documented. Correspondingly, the city has been the subject of a great deal of critical attention, although such discussions are dominated by historical and topographical concerns that largely ignore the question of representability. In this essay I address an epistemological shift in literary and nonliterary representations of Berlin that affects how the city is seen and, in consequence, experienced. This representational change mirrors a cultural and social shift in German society, from the generation that experienced the division and predivision German pasts to what Stephan Schlak refers to as the “memory culture,” a culturally institutionalized form of remembering those pasts for future generations. It is worthwhile remembering at this juncture that it is always the present that defines historical moments and accrues them their meaning. That is, historical memory is selectively reconstructed and
subsequently communicated through, for example, monuments and memorial
days, and this historical “consciousness,” rather than historical “knowledge,”
over time formulates prescriptions of interpretation “that have the status of
norms.” Referring to this changed access to the historical past, one critic
writes of “a generational change of values, which is connected with a change
in historical memory.” To remember, in postwar Germany, the moral conse-
quences gleaned from that past was a significant part of the dominant histori-
cal perspective for this war generation. Among many others, Karl Jaspers’s
*Question of German Guilt* (1946), Theodor W. Adorno’s *Education after Ausch-
witz* (1966), and Richard von Weizsächer’s presidential speech on May 8, 1985,
in which “remembering means recalling an occurrence honestly and without
distortion [rein zu denken] so that it becomes a part of our very beings,” bear
testimony to the moral authority of the cultural memory of Nazism: the post-
war German biography was and still is seen through the optic of a *Gesinnungs-
ästhetik*, a collective aesthetics of conscience. But the declining numbers of
those who can actually remember presents a challenge to cultural memory and
moral authority discourses. For this “post-postwar generation,” there is rightly
no historical “trauma,” no personalization of guilt in relation to the Nazi past;
the shift in historical perception embodies a cultural rejection of reading Ger-
many through the narrative of Nazism.

There are advocates of reinterpreting cultural memory, Ernst Nolte,
Martin Walser, Ulrich Greiner, Frank Schirrmacher, to name but a few, who
have insisted on an obligation for contemporary Germany to move cultural,
social, and intellectual discourses beyond the restrictive and limited moral
optic of Nazism, by contextualizing the latter in a broader historical frame-
work. According to this much-acclaimed mantra, Germany has overcome the
trauma of Nazism, even though the many debates about history versus mem-
ory during the 1990s reveal a postwar *Schuldkultur* (guilt culture) still very
much in currency. The much-documented witch hunt against prominent East
German writers, notably Christa Wolf; Walser’s 1998 *Friedenspreisrede des
deutschen Buchhandels* (acceptance speech when awarded the peace prize of
the German book trade) in Saint Paul’s Church in Frankfurt; the Walser-Bubis
debate; Daniel Goldhagen’s problematic book, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*
(1996); the *Wehrmacht* exhibition; and the endless discussions on the Memo-

is referring to the changing modes of how knowledge is legitimized.
rial for the Murdered Jews of Europe testify to the continuing prevalence of the historical memory and guilt culture discourse-equation in the decade following reunification. The attacks against Wolf following the publication of her novella *Was bleibt* (*What Remains*) become meaningful if understood as attempts to thwart a cultural and social identity that could undermine the tabula rasa politics of the German Wende. There was a clear concern in some camps that Wolf’s book might trigger a revival of German Democratic Republic (GDR) aesthetics and cultural identification that would affect this desired historical closure.

Wolf’s novella, written in 1979 but published in revised form in 1990, documents a culture of observation and oppression, as well as a systematic undermining of individual identity in the GDR. The pertinence of the narrative to the debates about history versus memory is made clear in the final paragraph: “One day I will be able to speak easily and freely, I thought. It is still too soon, but it won’t always be too soon. . . . What remains? What is at the root of my city and what is rotting it from within? That there is no misfortune other than that of not being alive. And, in the end, no desperation other than that of not having lived.” The apparent voicelessness of the 1979 text is that of a writer routinely victimized by the East German secret police, but surely the inability to speak is also pertinent to the 1990 revision insofar as it expresses a concern that the East German writer will be voiceless in reunified Germany once the cultural and historical frameworks have been radically altered.

The tension between a perceived moral obligation to the past and a desire for contextualization is very much present in the literary production of post-Wende Berlin. The city was to be rebuilt as a symbol of and for the new republic and was a significant trigger to the shift in cultural memory. Endless
debates continue to surround Berlin’s buildings, past and present, its street names and historically loaded sites, such as the former East German People’s Palace, the Potsdamer Platz, and the former National Socialist Air Ministry. Post-reunification topographical tinkering raises important questions about representational legitimacy: there was more than asbestos cladding the arguments advocating the demolition of the East German Palace of the Republic in favor of a reconstructed royal palace. Equally, the decision to rename more than seventy streets in East Berlin that directly referenced East German history and cultural memory has been perceived by some as problematic.

With the rescission of the political division, the social and cultural memories of the GDR were to be reinterpreted: “Whenever a system of rule dissolves or is overthrown, the justification for its monuments—at least those that legitimized and fostered its rule—no longer exists.”9 This announcement by Berlin’s Chamber of Deputies served as a preface to an exhibition by the French photographer Sophie Calle at the Martin Gropius Museum in Berlin in 1996. The exhibition, The Detachment, traced the removal of monuments and buildings from East Berlin after 1990 by offering the visitor in every case two photographic images of particular sites: before and after reunification. The image taken after reunification invariably revealed an empty space, but one in which the trace of something could still be seen, the shadowy form of an absent building or the unintentional imprint of a long-since-removed sign. Accompanying each image was typescript of a conversation between the photographer and residents, who were asked to record what they remember about the missing memorial, the changed street name, or the demolished building. The intention was to “photograph the absence and replace the missing monuments with their memories.”10 The exhibition confronted the visitor with the challenge not only to remember the past but also to read those pasts in and through the city’s topography. What these photographs made clear was Berlin’s particular uniqueness born out of its astonishing past. They make visible the erased memories of the Cold War division as well as the historical traces of Nazism and Weimar Berlin, which in a great deal of Berlin-related literature (also)

8. Franz Pröfener observed that “jeder Bauplatz wurde als ‘Baustein’ für den Frieden dargestellt, jeder ‘Handschlag für den Aufbau Berlins’ sollte der ‘Einheit Deutschlands’ dienen” (every building site in the city was spoken of as a “founding stone” for future peace, and every handshake for the rebuilding of Berlin was to promote the reunification of Germany) (“Flirting with Disaster: Zur Symbolgegenwart der ‘Baustelle,’” in Zeitzeichen Baustelle: Realität, Inszenierung und Metaphorik eines abseitigen Ortes, ed. Franz Pröfener [Berlin: Campus, 1998], 17).
hemorrhage into the foundations of the self-styled new city. The weight of these pasts is felt in the city almost despite the attempts to suggest that the past has been sufficiently dealt with. The endless buses full of memorabilia-hungry tourists, the school groups negotiating the unintended excavations on the Potsdamer Platz, and the researchers from abroad writing about Berlin testify to the continuing importance of Berlin’s topography as a prism through which Germany’s past and present are often seen and discussed.

Since reunification, Berlin’s topography has undergone radical changes to confirm the image of a unified country and people. Of course, many changes are positive: an overhauled public transit system, significant infrastructural modernization, restored buildings and public areas, and improved roads. However, the identity of East Germany and East Berlin is systematically being undermined as references to the GDR’s (and, to a lesser degree, West Germany’s) historical and cultural memory are erased. In the reconstruction, the Potsdamer Platz is exemplary. A no-man’s-land in the heart of the city for forty years, powerfully symbolizing the war and the city’s division, it remains the second most important symbolic site, after that of the Palast der Republik. The Potsdamer Platz’s communicative power lay in its emptiness, a stark contrast to what had been before the war the city’s busiest public area. In his Berlin novel, Allerzielen (Ger. Allerseelen, or All Souls Day, 1999), the Dutch writer Cees Nooteboom refers to the rebuilding of this site as a moment of archaeological uncovering and forgetting at the same time. Leaning heavily on Walter Benjamin’s city walker–archaeologist trope, Nooteboom’s protagonist asserts that the site is “a realm of the dead and of the disappeared.”

The refusal to acknowledge through representation prolongs the continued absence of the dead and forgotten. The Potsdamer Platz was—and still is—the key exemplification of the architectural problems and issues inherent in the rebuilding of Berlin. Part of the discussion surrounding the Potsdamer Platz was (as it were) triumphalist

11. I refer here to Cees Nooteboom, Allerseelen (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999); Peter Schneider, Eduards Heimkehr (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1999); Thomas Hettche, Nox (Cologne: Du Mont, 2002); Norman Ohler, Mitte (Berlin: Rowohlt, 2001); Inka Parei, Die Schattenboxerin (Berlin: BtB, 1999); and Günter Grass, Ein weites Feld (Hamburg: DTV, 1997).


13. See Danielle Risterucci-Roudnicky, “Le Potsdamer Platz, anti-mémoire de Berlin?” in La mémoire des villes, ed. Yves Clavaron and Bernard Dieterle (Saint-Etienne: Publications de l’Université de Saint-Etienne, 2003), 288: “Après la Wende, reconstruire la place, c’était poser de front le problème de l’histoire: fallait-il déinscrire tout passé de la reconstruction ou, au contraire, l’intégrer? Le présent pouvait-il et devait-il faire le lien entre le passé (mais quel passé?) et l’avenir (quel avenir?)?” (To reconstruct that space [Berlin] after reunification was to confront the problem of representing history: should the past be erased from the reconstruction or, on the contrary, be made a part of it? Can and should the present become a link with the past (but which past?) and the future (but which future?)?).
in that it asserted the importance of giving full assent to the new beginning through architectural representation.

Perhaps a further indication that the mood has indeed changed in the post-Wende period is suggested in yet another Berlin building: Das Zeughaus. The seventeenth-century royal armory, heavily damaged in 1945, was reopened in the GDR as an apologetic museum of German history culminating in the socialist revolution. In 1983 Helmut Kohl expressed a cultural need for a (West German) museum of German history in Berlin. His call for a “contextualized” museum of German history in the former imperial capital prompted accusations of revisionism, of promoting a politics of forgetting, “nationalist apologetics,” which culminated in the Historikerstreit, the historian’s debate. It is indeed telling that the opening of a rather sober and positive permanent exhibition of German history at the recently inaugurated Deutschen Historischen Museum passed without event. The absence of any opposition to the inauguration in June 2006 (the exhibition was even acclaimed by Die Zeit, one of its most vociferous opponents) does possibly suggest a more relaxed feeling for, and approach to, German history and cultural memory.

Yet there are cultural and artistic dissenting voices to this rereading of German history through Berlin’s topography. Leander Haußmann’s 2003 adaptation of Sven Regener’s novel Herr Lehmann (2001), for example, is explicit in its representation of the opening of the Berlin Wall as a moment of paralysis and ontological crisis and not, as was frequently claimed, a liberating new beginning for the city. Set in November 1989, the film tropes the comfortable existence of the West, metonymically represented through the former West Berlin district of Kreuzberg, and confronts it with the opening of the Wall (which is watched passively on a TV in a bar). The fall of the Berlin Wall is experienced as an outpouring, an unwanted opening of all that had been comfortably locked away for forty years—perhaps this is why one viewer watching the event exclaims, “Shit, now they’re all coming over here.” The final result is a loss of identity and sense of orientation, which might explain the paralysis, both literal and figurative, of the film’s protagonists. A similar notion of loss is developed in Hannes Stöhr’s film Berlin Is in Germany (2001), in which a GDR convict is released from prison after reunification and finds that he is an unwelcome reminder of a GDR past. Parodying media portrayals of East German citizens, the protagonist is sucked into West Berlin’s sex industry to become even further removed from his cultural framework. This

trope of the sex industry as strangely representative of West Germany and West Berlin is played out again in Wolfgang Becker’s *Goodbye Lenin!* (2003), a less-than-successful attempt to critically underscore the pitfalls of West German consumerism.

Although many films address memory, identity, and history in post-reunification Berlin and Germany, it was the Berlin novel that was most keenly awaited. I am not the first to observe the significance of literature in post-Wende Germany during the current conjuncture. Stephen Brockmann, for example, has commented in-depth on the political and social role of literature in pre- and post-reunification Germany. In the wake of reunification, there was the expectation that writers in East and West Germany would adopt a positive stance on the question of political, social, and cultural reunification after 1990: the public attacks on Günter Grass and Wolf in the early 1990s and the surprising rise of the reunification advocate Walser reveal the pervasiveness of this politics of normalcy. Normalcy not only suggests an inevitable (and healthy) shift from a strangely nationless guilt society but also a concomitant desire to forget the past, arguably by denying debate necessary public space. If literature had a unique social and cultural authority in pre-unification Germany, it should not come as a surprise that it continues to be a critical voice for a post-Wende audience.

In the present article I compare fictional representations of post-1990 Berlin in Friedrich Christian Delius’s *Die Flatterzunge* (*The Fickle Tongue*, 1999) and Grass’s *Ein weites Feld* (*Too Far Afield*, 1995) with the portrayals of Berlin in Wladimir Kaminer’s *Schönhauser Allee* (2001) and Tanja Dückers’s *Spielzone* (*Play Zone*, 1999) and argue that all four visions of the city respond and contribute to the history and memory debates that renegotiated the memory of Nazism and the GDR in the decade following (and preceding) reunification. These texts offer wide-ranging perspectives on Berlin over a decade through often-conflicting generational differences and thereby make possible a perspective that reveals how dissimilar representations of Berlin can be, indeed are,


16. “Rückblickend muss es erstaunen, wie einseitig und massiv die öffentliche Meinung Druck auf die Autoren ausübte” (Looking back, it is shocking how one-sided and threatening the pressure of public opinion was on the authors) (Neuhaus, *Literatur und nationale Einheit*, 357).
and in so doing underscore a shift in what is considered central to how Berlin is represented. Grass exemplifies a generation of writers for whom an obligation to remember the past is central to his literary production, however problematic those pasts might be, as his most recent autobiographical sketch, *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* (*Peeling the Onion*, 2006), testifies.\(^{17}\) Grass, like Delius, remains a vociferous opponent of historical revisionism and critic of the politics of tabula rasa exemplified in the rebuilding of East and West Berlin.

There is a generation of post-reunification writers, however, for whom the city’s pasts, its cultural memory and its historically loaded signifiers, appear to be of limited concern.\(^{18}\) Their portrayals of the city underscore a thematic shift and deliberate break away from those more historically concerned Berlin representations. The literary focus of these writers is on the quotidian urban experiences of a wave of young people coming to Germany’s new metropolis. In the novels of Dückers and Kaminer, for example, the day-to-day lives of Berlin’s younger population are of interest: what they eat, with whom they sleep and how often, what they wear, and how they negotiate a city that offers them the possibility to redefine themselves, historically and culturally, in the amnesiac decade following reunification. At the 2006 Frankfurt Book Fair, younger German writers voiced their frustration with the “inflated discourse of the antiaircraft artillery-recruit” generation and attacked the intellectual gerontocracy in German literature.\(^{19}\) As one proponent of this new literary scene noted, the reason for the nonrecognition of Berlin’s historically mottled topography in much of contemporary writing is because of the previous generation’s excessive preoccupation with the past and, in particular, “the pedagogical obsession in schools with Nazism.”\(^{20}\) It remains to be seen if Schirmacher’s call for a new German literature, apolitical and unshackled by a West German Gesinnungsästhetik, has been finally answered and what the consequences of this shift might be. But the portrayals of Berlin suggest a generational tension between calls to remember the past or pasts and calls advocating a “normal” aesthetic quiescence.

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17. Sigrid Weigel observes that after “World War II and the Shoah, a chronology was established in which history was counted in generations and also recounted, or told, by members of those generations. With the increasing distance from the war . . . the discourse on second and third generations has become more and more prominent” (“‘Generation’ as a Symbolic Form: On the Genealogical Discourse of Memory since 1945,” *Germanic Review* 4 [2002]: 264).

18. “The concept of generation, long popular in cultural discourse, has been enriched with a new variant, the ‘Berlin Generation’” (Weigel, “‘Generation,’” 264).


It might prove helpful to take this issue of urban hermeneutics (or the act of reading the city as a text) farther by addressing the textual performances of urban experience in these four very different Berlin novels. A comparison reveals an oscillation (decidedly generational) between desire for “meaning” in *Die Flatterzunge* and *Ein weites Feld* and desire for “presence” in *Schoenhauser Allee* and *Spielzone*. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht argues that desire for presence might better be described as a rejection of the famous Cartesian dualism, advocating instead a temporary blurring of subject and object, that is, a preconceptual if not uncritical living. Desire for “meaning,” on the other hand, implies knowledge produced by a subject in an act of object interpretation, “penetrating with the mind the material surface of the world in order to find truth behind or beneath it” (*PP*, 25). Gumbrecht rightly argues that the dominant self-reference in a meaning culture is the mind, in a presence culture it is the body—legitimate knowledge as revealed knowledge or what Heidegger refers to as “events of unconcealment,” *being coming forth as it were fully*. But this “wholeness” is only possible outside the networks of semantics and other cultural distinctions—to live momentarily as it were, in a blank urban space (*PP*, 70). Leaning on Gumbrecht’s analysis of “presence and meaning” I argue that these texts challenge us to rethink some of the conditions of knowledge production gleaned from urban experience—given that the concept of “experience” is commonly associated with interpretation and meaning attribution (*PP*, 100).

Through their representations of Berlin, Kaminer and Dückers make possible a rethinking of “experience” in relation to self and city by challenging a commonly held perception of the subject-object binary. Their texts represent experience as *Erleben*, lived experience (preconceptual), rather than as *Erfahrung*, conceptual experience, phenomenologically speaking. In contrast to this at times ahistorical experience of the city, Delius’s and Grass’s novels ask the reader to experience and interpret Berlin in phenomenological relation to the broader cultural, historical, and political framework of reunification, Nazism, and the consequences thereof. Through a singular engagement with Germany’s histories and the memories of those histories as they are revealed in Berlin’s topography—its buildings, memorials, street names, and other urban

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22. Gumbrecht writes that “what is ‘present’ to us (very much in the sense of the Latin form *prae-esse*) is in front of us, in reach of and tangible for our bodies” (*PP*, 17).
markers—the protagonists glean meaning based on an experience (*Erfahrung*) of the city as an object of and for analysis. Through this meaning-based attribution both texts portray Berlin as a symbolic site that urges the reader to remember the division and predivision German pasts and insists on the continuing individual and collective significance of these pasts to East and West Germans alike.

**Critical Pedestrianism: Delius and Grass**

Delius’s *Die Flatterzunge* appropriates Berlin’s topography, in particular the Holocaust Memorial and the Potsdamer Platz, and uses those sites to launch a public discussion on cultural and historical memory in post-reunification Germany.23 The choice of subject and the clear parallels with contemporary public debates, notably the furor surrounding Walser’s *Friedenspreisrede*, in which he claimed that the history of Nazism had become a moral club “for some intellectuals” with which to beat Germans over the head, reassert a continuing political and social tradition of German literature. In the context of a critique of historical revisionism, which Walser’s critics claimed was at the core of his 1998 speech, Delius’s novel should be seen as intentionally provocative. In May 1997 the Berlin Opera gave a series of concerts in Israel. The event was widely seen as a gesture of rapprochement between Israel and Germany. On the fourth day of the opera tour in Tel Aviv, Gerd Reinke, the first-trombone player, signed his hotel bar tab “Adolf Hitler,” claiming that Hitler would pay for the bill. Reinke claimed that it was merely a joke, but the gaffe soon became widely known following extensive media coverage both in Germany and abroad. Reinke was sent home and dismissed from the Berlin State Orchestra. *Die Flatterzunge* is a fictionalized account of the now infamous incident, although the convergence of fact and fiction turns the text into a stage on which to address prevailing debates about memory and history as they played out in Berlin. Through this narrative engagement with the city seen through a fictionalized Gerd Reinke, Berlin becomes a political and social concern as it is a literary or narrative one.

The city’s significance for Delius’s text lies precisely in the protagonist’s preoccupation with the memory of Nazism insofar as Berlin confronts the protagonist, Hannes, with those pasts. However, Hannes’s focus on the city is limited to a historical saturation that allows no other perspective on or of the city:

“Once AH, always AH” (F, 114). This reductionism represents a form of historical consciousness in extremis. Evidence for this reading is to be found in an account he gives of his relationship with his musical instrument, the trombone, which is also burdened with the stain of Nazism: “The ram’s horn of the Old Testament. But for Luther, it smacked too much of synagogue, too Jewish, which is why he changed it to trombone, which had only recently been invented” (F, 27). In an intriguing convergence of the public-collective and private-individual, the protagonist sees himself as unfairly burdened with an instrument tainted with an anti-Semitic past, a burden he equates with the burden that he claims all Germans must carry, namely, to remember the crimes of Nazi Germany. Hannes is at pains to emphasize the convergence of the public and private, a woven tapestry of personal memories and collective histories, with a particular emphasis on the National Socialist past. He refers to his imbroglio in Tel Aviv as “My Struggle [Mein Kampf] with the waiter” (F, 104) in an ironic but nonetheless revealing contextualized understanding of his struggle with the past, thematically linked with his earlier claim that a small part of Hitler continues to exist in each German citizen. The reference to Hitler’s own blending of autobiographical history with that of German national destiny in Mein Kampf lends support to this reading. His own history, as that of any German, is inextricably linked with the German past, along with the problematic issue of responsibility to remember in light of the Shoah.

The obsessive preoccupation with history and cultural memory in Berlin takes on many forms. The city is a site of layered histories, each vying to be heard and rescued from oblivion. In Berlin “everyone stumbles over the paving stones of German history. Awkwardness again and again when the past rears its head” (F, 32). This image conveys a negative image of German history, something that is there only to threaten and undermine, though at the same time underlining a thematic link between city and citizen. It is not only twentieth-century history that poses weighty problems of representation, but preceding centuries also struggle to be heard in the city-text. Finding a consensus on commemorating the 1848 revolutionaries in Berlin proved equally problematic: “The Transport Minister, from the opposition party, noisily announced that the short stretch of street was just right to commemorate the March revolutionaries because it leads to the Street of the 17th of June: ‘The historical context! . . . We all have our own principles, our own barricades,’ Ulli said. ‘But I didn’t take part in the 1848 uprising,’ I said. ‘That is an ahistorical way of thinking,’ said Ulli” (F, 32–33). The city is here a historical map in which every detail is of monumental significance. In the case above, the historical
context is a thematic bundling of a history of Berlin’s revolutions, representing an attempt to draw a historical line between the past and the present. It is consistent with this way of thinking that the street commemorating the revolutionaries of the 1848 uprisings should (thematically) link to the Street of the 17th of June: two examples of attempts to liberate the city from the yoke of tyranny, from the Prussian monarchy to the ruling factions of East Germany. Here is the suggestion that the city not only commemorates the historical but also tries to understand and contextualize it. But Hannes is unable to establish such historical links or perceive history as something from which positive meanings at a collective level might be drawn. His reading of the debate and of the city is frustratingly subjective because he insists on reading German history as a moral club that persecutes him—“I didn’t take part in the 1848 uprising”—without grasping that an individual staging of the historical debate is not the issue here.

A walk in the city park schematizes this narrow focus on a historically saturated city: “Every tree, every shrub, every flower speaks: You are in the center of Berlin, as you twist yourself, as you turn yourself. Beneath the grassy earth, the volcanoes of the past” (F, 122). The image of whispering flora suggests the paranoia of being constantly observed, even spied on “as you twist, as you turn yourself,” again underlining an assumed inescapability from an Argos-like historically saturated Berlin. But the verb wenden (turn) also puns the noun, Wende, the term for reunification as turning point in German history—no matter how much Germany turns, changes, or claims to be turning or changing, the past will always be present. It is not enough that history is simply “there”; its presence connotes a certain danger, a threat to everyday existence in the city.

The vulcanized fiber of the city constantly threatens Berlin and its citizens with its multifarious pasts. The protagonist’s awareness of Berlin’s topography suggests a psychopathic paranoia analogous to extreme forms of repression and neurotic disorder. For example, having just passed the site of the planned Holocaust Memorial, he sees a butcher’s lorry and remarks, “‘Butcher Dachbau,’ the lettering on a truck, I read: ‘Butcher Dachau,’ the Butcher of Dachau” (F, 114). It is apparent that the text situates itself in a wider, ongoing discourse on the memory of Nazism and of the Shoah in post-reunification Germany and the “performance” of that past in the city fabric.

This subjective perception lends itself to a form of persecution angst: “Observation position in the café on Nollendorfplatz. It is certain: the waiter at the café is the barman from Tel Aviv” (F, 130). There is again the converging
of Berlin and Tel Aviv, an inability to hold them apart, to read one without the other. In his flight from the café on the Nollendorfplatz, he flees to the former East: “I’d rather have a coffee in Prenzlauer Berg or on Mohrenstrasse” (F, 51). He feels safer in East Berlin because for Hannes it is a site of difference, one not immediately plagued by the postwar discourses from which he is attempting to free himself. It is an inconsistency manifest in the protagonist that underlines the nonconnectedness of his historical imaginings. Berlin, although desperately building for the future, only manages to uncover an accusing past: “The deeper you penetrate, the sooner your field of vision will suddenly fall onto the fragmented lumps of history: onto William’s ruins, those of the Nazis, of Stalin, of Ulbrichts, onto the pits and the façades of the new marvelous Federal Republic [Bundesherrlichkeit]” (F, 122). His remark reveals an understanding of the past as something that refuses to go away as well as a terrifying perception of a city that refuses to forget. In contrast to the act of urban pedestrianism in Ein weites Feld, pedestrianism in Die Flatterzunge is reversed and subjectivized. Even the book’s title, referring to a fluttering or untrustworthy tongue, suggests a pun precisely on this tendency to see himself as a victim, to offer rationalizations for faux pas instead of a broader and less subjectively determined understanding of events.

Textually, these flights from any form of weighty confrontation with the past gain further meaning when contrasted with the preferred place of refuge, the Potsdamer Platz. The complex concatenation of possible experiences at the site liberates Hannes from his own obsession with the past because it promises a new beginning: “All of a sudden, I was happy . . . enthroned above history” (F, 53). The future, in a pun on the victors of history, is now in the hands of Sony; that is, it is multinational, non-German, and a break from the past: “The past was bad or difficult and burdened with history; the future will be good and beautiful and smart” (F, 52). What attracts him to this site is an assumed ahistoricism—“in the hours spent [at the Potsdamer Platz] I never once thought about my crime . . . everything forgotten, for the first time in months” (F, 55)—and thus it becomes, paradigmatically, a representative example of Hannes’s uncritical engagement with the past: “Forum Germanicum, if I could only remember where I picked up that word” (F, 53). It is a site where history cannot be instrumentalized or monumentalized because it is being erased from the city fabric, at least in terms of its immediate accessibility. One section of the Berlin Wall now remains, and the history of the site has long since disappeared beneath the glass promises of the Sony Center and the Bundesbahn Tower. The text develops the claim that the memory and history of Nazism is
being monumentalized, if not instrumentalized, as well as the advocacy of an individual dealing with the historical.\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Die Flatterzunge} develops the consequences of subjective perception and turns the criticisms of its promoters against Hannes by making possible a novelistic portrait in which the consequences of a policy of active repression and subjective perception when faced with the historical are made visible. Events in the past, and the memory of political and moral consequences gleaned from the remembering of that past, shape historical memory. The protagonist’s desire “to perform Jericho in the center of Berlin” (\textit{F}, 54) has fatal consequences in terms of his limited historical perception, and this destructive urge can only be repeated, if only because the moments enthroned above history are too ephemeral to be lasting: “Never again, I thought, will it be so beautiful here as it is now, today, in these moments: so unfinished, plural, wild, raw, lively, as budding and fertile [\textit{sprießend}] as spring” (\textit{F}, 53).

Grass’s text, \textit{Eine weites Feld}, is thematically linked to the concerns expressed in \textit{Die Flatterzunge} but extends the historical optic beyond a focus on the memories of Nazism.\textsuperscript{25} The novel’s central fable is the critical relationship of two protagonists from East Berlin, Fonty and Hoftaller, to the events unfolding after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The novel contextualizes reunification in a decidedly historical framework realized through intertextual references and chronological character doublings: the title of Grass’s novel is a quotation borrowed from Theodor Fontane’s novel \textit{Effi Briest}. Fonty, alias Theo Wuttke, imitates Fontane’s own life to such a degree that their biographies repeatedly overlap, providing a playful and, at times, ironic doubling, which serves in the text to recall the tension between fact and fiction. Hoftaller’s name is borrowed from Joachim Schädlich’s novel about a secret agent in nineteenth-century Germany who spied on Fontane’s political activities, as Hoftaller spies on Fonty’s movements in the GDR. In addition to these historical doublings,

\textsuperscript{24} See, e.g., Martin Walser’s claim: “Jeder kennt unsere geschichtliche Last, die unvergängliche Schande, kein Tag vergeht, an dem sie uns nicht vorgehalten wird.” There are times, the author notes, “wenn ich nirgends mehr hinschauen kann, ohne von einer Beschuldigung attackiert zu werden.” Against this, Walser advocates rejecting collective forms of remembering: “Das Gewissen, sich selbst überlassen, produziert noch Schein genug. Öffentlich gefordert, regiert nur der Schein. Birgt und verbirgt nicht jeder ein innerstes, auf Selbstachtungsproduktion angelegtes Spiegelkabinett?” (There are moments when I can no longer turn without feeling the attack of an accusation. . . . Conscience, left alone, creates enough appearance. If publicly promoted, appearance alone governs [the conscience]) (\textit{Erfahrung beim Verfassen einer Sonntagsrede: Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels, 1998} [Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1998], 17).

the text also confuses the unifications of 1871 and 1990 through overlapping literary and historical references. The intertextual doublings in the novel establish a historical as well as a literary awareness that bridges the past 150 years of Berlin and German history.

Grass’s is a critical perspective of the city, one stubbornly opposed to the “Kurzlebigkeit des Gedenkens” (*Ein weites Feld*, 177), the ephemerality of remembering, which provides the historical framework for the text as a whole. The complex narrative time of *Ein weites Feld*, which Grass elsewhere refers to as “Vergegenkunft,” composes the past, the present, and the future into a readable medium in the present that the reader experiences in an act of meaning attribution. A layered perspective of time is performed in the text both through the protagonists’ exploration of the city as well as their singular confrontations with Berlin’s unique spaces offering them “an opportunity for discussions in the historical panorama” (*TFA*, 14). The aesthetic structure of the intertext and the temporally convergent periods of past and present, in respect of the last 150 years, demand of the reader not merely a perception of “then” or “now,” of Fontane or “Fonty” Wuttke, the German unification of 1871 or that of 1990, but also a recognition that this fluidity of literary and historical awareness works as a comparative backdrop to and a critical purchase on current events. *Ein weites Feld* resists claims of an end of history, or the apotheosis of a simplified teleology, by positing in its place the value of indirection, clutter, and pedestrianism. Through their frequent perambulations from “Berlin to Berlin” (*TFA*, 6), Fonty and Hoftaller engage with East and West Berlin’s complexly layered topography by reading the city’s histories, its revolutions and upheavals and sociopolitical identities through the buildings, street names, and memorials. Their walks underline a resonant, circumstantial perception of Berlin, which registers the city’s physicality while promoting an awareness of Berlin as a multilayered, historically situated, readable text. In Grass’s novel, Berlin becomes, in the words of Paul Ricoeur, “a reservoir of traces . . . left behind by past events.”

The urban ramblings of Grass’s protagonists are always moments of interpretation and meaning attribution, of a more critical nature than Delius’s


protagonist. Fonty and Hoftaller walk across Berlin as if they are trying to uncover such hidden traces and possibly forestall their exclusion from the unified city—sites, buildings, and street names trigger individual and collective memories that reassert the city as a unique "their" own: "Place after place brought memories to the surface" (TFA, 409). A concern that "they" are being excluded from the form the unified city is to take is played out, for example, as they watch the dismantling of the Berlin Wall. Peering through a hole in the Wall, they create a portrait of themselves for the reader: "From the other side, Fonty was visible through the widened fissure from the chest up. Next to him, Hoftaller entered the picture from the shoulders up" (TFA, 8). The portrait contextualizes both characters in a distinctively East German setting underscoring a protest against exclusion and vilification, helping them "take possession of space in which they are insecure."28 The Wall framing and contextualization of the protagonists makes clear a desire to hold on to a past and a sense of identity that is in danger of being erased. Returning to the portrait, an attentive border guard, the reader is told, had he been on patrol, "could have snapped [schießen] a serviceable mug shot of the two for the files" (TFA, 8). Krishna Winston's translation fails to address the ambiguity of the linguistic reference: the verb schießen (to shoot) refers both to the act of taking a photograph but is also a metaphor and a reference to the real historical violence of the Berlin Wall. Yet the scene of contextualization also insists that the Wall and its historical baggage are, however heinous, integral to the identity of the East, West—and reunified Republic.

Taking himself out of the wall frame, Fonty watches the Wall pickers chip away at the concrete structure: the Wall, which "yesterday had still seemed relevant," was now yielding museum-ready swatches (TFA, 7), souvenir fragments, and historical memory sold in Ziploc bags. It is not the dismantling of the Wall that is being challenged in this scene but the efforts of the West to determine the historical memory of the East—Fonty refers to this "deconstruction" as "the second wave of dismantling by the West" (TFA, 7). There is no mourning the fall of the Berlin Wall as Grass critics were claiming: the violence of the Wall is evoked, as is a concern with a tabula rasa perception of reunification from which references to the past sixty or so years of German history have been removed.

The illustration of loss and deracination in East Berlin is demonstrated through an extended concentration on the purging of historical references to the GDR from Berlin's topography, which are quickly replaced with other

signs whose purpose is to promote a postdivision Germany that has now overcome the burden of the past. The changing of street names that function as historical signifiers is one example of topographical recodification. But, as the text makes clear, the loss of such signifiers will bring about a loss in historical memory and, concomitantly, a loss of cultural identity. The city is one part of a signifying constellation that helps establish “a certainty of who one is in times of change, forming one’s identity as a factual synthesis of having existed [Gewesenseins] and normative projections of self-as-subject in relation to others.”

For the novel’s protagonists, it is precisely this normative relation of the self to others that is being undermined.

With reference to his own address, Fonty remarks, “Whether Kollwitzplatz and the street of the same name would survive was by no means certain at the beginning of this most recent period of revolution and reevaluation” (TFA, 145). This erasure of historical references from the city constituted a process that actively undermines historical and social continuity. The text repeatedly argues through topographic referencing that it is the common connections and involvements with the city that give us collective identities and shared orientations and values. To be part of a public or social collective always presupposes an “ability to experience things that happened to groups to which we belong long before we even joined them as if they were part of our own personal past.”

For Grass’s protagonists it is precisely this normative relation of the self to a collectively shared past that is being undermined.

The novel posits the paternoster lift (a lift that consists of a chain of open compartments that move slowly in a loop up and down inside a building without stopping) as a counterweight to historical erasure. As the structural centerpiece of the former National Socialist Air Ministry (NSAM), it functions in the text as a reminder of the past while also serving as a recognizable and integral presence in the day-to-day business of the people working in the building: “United in the paternoster. From the Reichsmarschall to the head of the Handover Trust” (TFA, 476). The centrality of the former NSAM building to the novel lies both in its function of highlighting a coexistent historicity beginning

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with the National Socialist years, leading on through the Communist dictatorship and up to the present period of the text, while exemplifying temporal recoding processes determined by the political and social changes of its sixty-year history. The building, once the NSAM, then the House of Government Ministries in the GDR, is at the time of the novel housing the Handover Trust, a government department responsible for overseeing the privatization of GDR state-owned companies.

The metaphoric function of the paternoster performs Fonty’s own concept of time: “He grasped the changeover mechanism in the guise of a tirelessly obliging elevator. So much greatness. So many descents. So many endings and beginnings” (TFA, 476). Its grinding course through the building accords the text a visceral image of endlessly recycled time while providing the narrative with a textual space to perform cyclical history through palimpsest-like images that simultaneously portray historical as well as contemporary events: “Next to Ulbricht sat Goebbels; the Communist next to the Nazi, the Goatee next to the Clubfoot” (TFA, 475). The turning point refers to the point at which the lift quite literally turns to begin its downward journey, but it is surely intended also as a pun on the German Wende. Hence the Wende is not a unique moment—it is just another moment of recycled time. As the city exemplifies, “There’s always some residue” (TFA, 72), echoing the playful interpretation of Wende in Die Flatterzunge.

But history is always more than just recycled time, and the paternoster’s function as a metaphor for such cyclical processes is limited. As a machine it is destined to run its grinding course predictably and mechanically. But the lift and the building, as with all the other historical signifiers in the city, are uncovered for the reader through an interpretative pedestrianism—the novel’s real counter to historical erasure. It is the protagonists’ indirect, nonemphatic meanderings that are the hub for the novel’s portrayal of time. The nerve center of Ein weites Feld is the resonant and circumstantial historical perception of the East, namely, its unique identity, as registered by Fonty and Hoftaller in their “experience” of the city. The novel insists time and again on reading individual as well as collective histories and memories through Berlin’s topography. Grass’s novel advocates a political as well as historical urban hermeneutics that goes against the grain of reunification discourses insisting on a tabula rasa reading of German reunification.

Berlin Refocused: Shifting Perspectives
In contrast to the historical nerve centers that pulse through characters, settings, and urban perceptions in Die Flatterzunge and Ein weites Feld, other portrayals of Berlin in contemporary young German fiction are more ambigu-
ous and less historically consumed. These Berlin novels reject perceptions of the city and in particular the district Prenzlauer Berg as a historically saturated and inscribed site. The city-text is often portrayed by this younger generation of novelists as a blank sheet inhabited by a historically indifferent generation of partygoers, as is suggested in the title of Spielzone (Play Zone). The post–Cold War city has become an illusionary ground zero for a generation that will have no truck with the past, at least with the metanarratives of twentieth-century German history. Such, as it were, ahistorical and anti-ideological representations reflect a literary development encouraged by a largely unknown generation of young German writers to which Kaminer and Dückers belong. As Richard Herzinger somewhat pointedly remarked, it is a generation of writers for whom the concerns of the older generation of German authors have limited appeal: “The time when one associated ‘writing/writers’ with the sullen morality of a Günter Grass, the self-punishing introvertedness of a Christa Wolf, and the nonconformist gesture of old men in baggy corduroy trousers is over.” This is not to claim that their texts are in any way ludic or embody a rejection of the historical: there are references to the past, and what finally emerges are not narratives of amnesia but a narrative act of exploring a generation that believes itself to be living in a condition of amnesia. But it remains nonetheless a generation that “could have ‘shook up’ the dealings with the German past.” I argue, in contrast to frequent interpretations of this pop trend, that these texts are critical of the ahistorical perceptions of their protagonists but insist nonetheless on a very different literary representation and awareness of Berlin that rejects the cultural dominance of the Gesinnungsästhetik.

Kaminer’s Schönhauser Allee is a much-celebrated counterhistorical Berlin text. The narrative focus of this collection of short stories is at all times the Schönhauser Allee in the East Berlin district of Prenzlauer Berg, a district once synonymous with an alternative art-scene lifestyle, which although not

32. It is also possible to include Illies, Generation Golf; Ohler, Mitte; and Thomas Brussig, Helden wie wir (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1999). However, for the purposes of this essay, I focus on two representative new Berlin texts.
34. Herzinger, “Jung, Schick und Heiter.”
35. “Tatsächlich gebärdet sich der heutige Pop als geschichtslos, plötzliche Erscheinung: pop is now. Dementsprechend spielt Geschichte für und in ihm keinerlei Rolle, sie existiert nicht” (Contemporary pop literature actually behaves as if it were without historical precedent, suddenly appearing as it were: pop is now. Accordingly, history plays no role in or for it as a movement; it [history] doesn’t exist) (Marcel Diel, “Näherungsweise Po,” Kritische Ausgabe: Zeitschrift für Germanistik und Literatur 4, no. 1 [2000]: 3).
unique to Prenzlauer Berg, was, before its face-lift gentrification, more visibly present than in other parts of the city. Writers and artists flocked to Prenzlauer Berg in the early 1990s, lulled in part by a nostalgic longing: for the recently arrived, the facades of turn-of-the-century buildings inscribed with the writings of Berlin’s twentieth-century history, of cobblestone streets, stripped flooring in stuccoed apartments, and the heavy lingering trail of coal in the air connoted something “authentic.” Clearly Julian Preece was not alone in ascribing a greater authenticity to the GDR, in opposition to the West that had succumbed to American cultural trends. But this mythic perception of Prenzlauer Berg was in rooted popular consciousness even before the fall of the Berlin Wall, as it was once a district famed for its young writers, intellectuals, and artists as conscientious objectors to the GDR, a perception that continued to hold sway even after the Sasha Anderson story of Stasi infiltration and petit bourgeois fetishes. It is perhaps a bizarre twist that as the restoration of Prenzlauer Berg’s apartment buildings to the Prussian pomp and pageantry is almost complete, there is still a pervasive perception of the district as something “authentic,” yet one much shaped by a reappropriated GDR aesthetics, myth construction, and literal postwar rebuilding.

_Schönhauser Allee_ is both part of and builds on this mythic Prenzlauer Berg reconstruction, even though the text is nearly always conscious of this tension: “Every now and again it rains on Schönhauser Allee” (_SA_, 66). Importantly, this collection of short stories gestures toward a thematic and literary cultural shift in literary representations of Berlin away from the preoccupations common to the Delius and Grass texts. Born in Moscow in 1967, Kaminer emigrated to Germany in 1990, along with a number of Russian émigrés, whose cultural influence was to radically alter parts of Berlin’s cultural scene. It is hardly surprising that both of his Berlin texts, _Russendisko_ and _Schönhauser Allee_, address East Berlin’s Russian, multicultural milieu. Their histories, perceptions, and cultural differences are what Kaminer’s Berlin texts are about: it is not reunification but integration that is debated. It is the unashamedly quotidian lives of Kaminer’s characters, their attempts to integrate into Berlin’s multifarious cultural life, the experience of consumerism in the Schönhauser Arkaden, and the pseudo-Benjaminian reflections on life on the Schönhauser Allee that furnish the text’s Berlin stories.

37. Julian Preece, _The Life and Times of Günter Grass_ (New York: Palgrave, 2001). Preece claims that the East had systematically maintained more traditional ways of life in contrast to the West. The East, he observes, held on to “old, slower ways of doing things,” which “is one way of keeping in touch with the past” (205).
Historical reflection is absent from these singular Berlin portrayals: there are no attempts to understand East Berlin in a historical framework or any critical thoughts beyond whatever is immediately visible and commented on. This absence of a critical-historical perspective reveals itself through the celebration of a presence culture, a mode of preconceptual urban nonmeaning experience. Given the absence of a hermeneutical engagement, there is evidence to support the claim that Kaminer’s text embodies a post-reunification, post-\textit{Gesinnungsästhetik} literature that emphatically resides in the present.

Rummaging through the rubbish bins in a yard, for example, the narrator finds what he takes to be the GDR’s cultural assets: “I wanted to find out to which cultural assets the contemporary reader, at the threshold of this new millennium, was saying goodbye”; it was the “\textit{Studies on the Marxist Theory of Literature in the GDR} [that] I put straight back into the container” (SA, 29). The memories, the narrator claims, “on the times that are associated with such tomes” are still too present, though for whom is unclear (SA, 30). In an uncanny echo of how Adenauer Germany dealt with the specter of Nazism, a more critical reflection on and engagement with the past is equally rejected and history along with it: “These problems belong to the past” (SA, 30).

In the context of this historical revisionism, it is revealing that Grass’s first novel, \textit{Die Blechtrommel}, is among those critical works found in the rubbish container. The contextualization of the historical directly echoes Schirrmacher’s and Nolte’s call for a rethinking of Germany’s relationship to the past, in particular the National Socialist past and its consequences. It is difficult to ignore the tabula rasa thinking that permeates Kaminer’s Berlin stories: this allocation of the past to the dustbin of history is problematic because the absence of critical historical awareness can only mean an uncritical relation to the present. Such an uncritical relation is very much in evidence in Kaminer’s text as the pervasive-ness of the immediate bereft of a wider context lends the collection an unfortunate shallowness and superficial glaze, evidenced, for example, in the banal perceptions that litter the stories.

It is possible that the absence of metanarrative references lends support to the decidedly nondramatic delivery of the short stories and minibiographies. Perhaps this absence reflects a thinking that shrinks from ascribing meaning to human activities that extend beyond the context of the immediate and the local. This is poignantly implied in the final paragraph of a story that narrates the cultural and ethnic diversity of the families living in the speaker’s apartment building: “As winter really set in and the CDU [Christian Democratic Union] donation scandal escalated, life in our house also rapidly changed. . . . Eight Vietnamese carried a washing machine into their apartment, and the
sportswoman slipped on the ice while jogging, whereby she fractured two of her ribs” (SA, 25). There is no conclusion or grand finale to the text, only the temporality of events unable to permeate the cloistered lives of the modern city dweller. That is, there are no hidden meanings or discourses in the city that need to be interpreted; there is only the quotidian.38

What Kaminer’s text does offer the reader is an awareness of a changing society. In the story “Junggesellen und Familienwirtschaft,” for instance, the reader is made aware of a changing cultural demographics that must necessarily affect how the city is indeed portrayed and experienced. It is, more important, a perception absent from many historically focused contemporary Berlin novels. Kaminer’s East Berlin is not the same historically loaded East Berlin portrayed by Fonty: “Three large families live in our house on the Schönhauser Allee: a Vietnamese family . . . , a modern Islamic one with three women and one man and a Russian one—mine” (SA, 22). Humorously and deliberately stereotyped, the text proceeds to offer generalized accounts of Berlin’s new population: “In the Vietnamese apartment, one has the feeling that they wash and cook uninterruptedly. The sweet-meaty smell, which fills the stairwell, makes me think of exotic things such as roasted dog with pineapple” (SA, 23). This portrayal does not insist on the uniqueness of the district as an ethnically diverse area but emphasizes that its inhabitants’ histories, cultures, and lives are also part of the city’s fabric and part of Berlin representations. It is a playful but nonetheless weighty recognition of cultural re-visioning, what Homi K. Bhabha has referred to as “local history.”39 Indeed, “Germans,” as the homogenizing non-other, are noticeable by their absence: in forty-nine short stories they appear only a handful of times. There is an interesting parallel to Kaminer’s Berlin portrayals in Fred Kelemen’s film Abendland (Nightfall, 1999), in which Berlin is seen exclusively through the perspective of East European fringe groups of criminals and prostitutes. The film, like Kaminer’s Berlin short stories, reveals the common themes of homelessness and civic affiliation, and of foreigners, outsiders, immigrants, and vagrants, in contemporary Berlin portrayals. Politically speaking, the stories expose the limits of cultural integration in Germany insofar as to refuse to acknowledge their difference is to be guilty of denying the other a unique cultural and historical background—in a number of the short Berlin portray-

38. The pertinence of Lyotard’s claim that “the little narrative [petit récit] remains the quintessential form of imaginative invention” to the “mini” narratives in the Kaminer text should not be overlooked (Postmodern Condition, 60). 39. Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 1994), xx.
als, the points of reference (historical, cultural, and otherwise) are Moscow, Siberia, and Albania, not German history seen through the optic of Berlin’s topography.

Beyond this inclusion of other cultural and ethnic narratives into Berlin’s topography, Kaminer’s Berlin portrait also celebrates East Berlin as a site of performance. “Life on Schönhauser Allee is often like a film, a contemporary fiction with huge production costs and uncountable extras” (SA, 18). The subject matter of the film is the traffic, the passersby, the trams, or the common turbulence of the city. The significance of this quotation is twofold: on the one hand, it complements through its insistence on the everyday the rejection of metanarrative meaning; on the other, it consciously builds on the common perception of Prenzlauer Berg as a site of self-conscious, at times unironic, stylization. The narrator is clearly aware of the clichéd self-representation of the district, as the titles Famous Personalities on Schönhauser Allee, Bill Clinton, Elvis Presley, Mickey Rourke, and John Malkovich suggest. Prenzlauer Berg is already itself a fictional representation. In the story “Famous Personalities on Schönhauser Allee: Charles Bukowski,” for example, Bukowski pulls his car over at night to ask the author for directions, stumbles drunk, urinates against the side of his car, and then drives off, leaving the car-door handle lying on the road: “‘I’m going to hang this on the wall at home as a souvenir of this amazing meeting,’ he said, biting off a piece of my pretzel” (SA, 28). Again undercutting any possible moment of meaning or grandeur through bathos (“biting off a piece of my pretzel”), the section nonetheless demonstrates an ironic self-consciousness in relation to a stylized past.

In contrast to the Grass and Delius protagonists, Kaminer’s narrators register the city uncritically but with a degree of irony and promoted vacuity: “Every now and again it rains on Schönhauser Allee” (SA, 66). The signifiers that were once meaning-giving for the cultural and social spectrum of East Germany and East Berlin are represented in the guise of two homeless drunks performing Marx and Engels: “The bottle is soon empty and lands underneath the bench. Engels, his beard askew, looks strangely sad today. He is probably missing his friend Marx. In the past, they happily sat together on this bench drinking to ‘German Ideology’” (SA, 53). For the narrator, the two drunks perform Marx and Engels and, by extension, the failure of the socialist ideal. In Kaminer’s short stories, the Schönhauser Allee becomes synonymous for a new way to negotiate Berlin, culturally and socially. Although celebrated as a successful, if playful, Berlin novel that offers the reader interesting insights into the difficulties of cultural integration in contemporary Germany, as a Berlin text it is arguably too limited for any
substantial representative portrayal. The perception here of an alternative way to look at Berlin is only marginally persuasive: Prenzlauer Berg is on every page but finally appears nowhere: the representation of East Berlin in Schönhauser Allee could equally be a district in Hamburg, Munich, or Düsseldorf.

The second generational text to which I now turn is yet a further example of this literary shift in negotiations with the memory of the socialist past. As in Kaminer’s text, historical perception is largely absent from Dückers’s Spielzone, although I disagree with an interpretation that insists Dückers’s Berlin novel also negates a cultural East-West paradigm—structurally, the text insists on this paradigm. Each section, composed of ten ministories, offers random sketches of West and East Berlin: the first section concentrates only on the “Thomasstrasse” in Neukölln (West Berlin), and the second on the “Sonnenburger Strasse” in Prenzlauer Berg (East Berlin). The two streets, illustrating “discontinuous spatial experience,” represent significant social, generational, and cultural shifts that affect how the city is perceived. The Thomasstrasse in West Berlin mirrors the paralysis of a society guiltily holding on to the past. The East, at least for the novel’s protagonists, reflects the promise of a new beginning, unhindered by such historical discourses, structurally developed through a thematic shift halfway through the novel from West to East, from one street to another, and, concomitantly, from the paralysis of the older generation to the hopes for a new, historically liberated younger one.

40. “Ruft noch jemand nach dem grossen Berlin-Roman? Bis der kommt, mag man sich mit Kaminer vergnügen und dessen Expeditionen durchs Dickicht der Stadt” (Is anyone still calling for the great Berlin novel? Until it arrives, one can take pleasure in reading Kaminer and his expeditions through the labyrinths of the city) (Süddeutsche Zeitung, n.d., cover text).

41. Tanja Dückers, Spielzone (Berlin: Aufbau, 1999). Hereafter cited as S. All translations are my own. This paradigm has been strangely ignored in readings of the novel. Both Neukölln and Prenzlauer Berg are for one critic “located outside the East-West paradigm,” although the text insists, however superficially, on several East-West paradigms of sorts. See Katharina Gerstenberger, “Play Zones: The Erotics of the New Berlin,” German Quarterly 76 (2003): 261. The media attacked Dückers’s novel for reworking the ambiguity of reference in her portrayal of Berlin. One critic maintained that this emphasis on the supposed “Generation X,” the Party Kids, and the Love Parades betrayed an unparalleled and tendentious self-interest in a largely superficial cultural phenomenon. Such critiques, however, largely ignored the question of whether this focus on the Generation X suggested an attempt to liberate literary perceptions of Berlin from a saturated historical optic of the postwar generation by making a reappropriation possible for a post-Wende generation. It is my claim that Spielzone is critical of the protagonists’ ahistorical perceptions but insists nonetheless on a very different literary representation and awareness of Berlin from the one that Grass offers.

The Thomasstrasse and the Hermannstrasse lie at the heart of Neukölln, a working-class district in West Berlin, and it is here that Spielzone situates the first ten ministories: “The ‘Trashmeile,’ another name for Hermannstrasse, . . . glows in a sea of fucked-up billboards” (S, 68). It is a depressingly common scene and one that deliberately reverses a common understanding of West Berlin as a site of newness, affluence, and economic success. The Trashmeile in Neukölln, the district’s commercial hub, is lifeless, as attested by the broken and scrapped advertisements littering the street. This scene would only be depressing if “a convoy of police cars speed[ing] past” (S, 68) did not also hint at violence. This opening scene sets the tone for the other nine Neukölln-based stories: “For a few seconds, reflected through the foggy window of a kebab takeout, a meat skewer bores into my head” (S, 9). But the violent image dissipates; it is just a momentary magic-lantern illusion seen through the mirror and the window, as the blood on the floor is revealed to be a trail of beer. Although the aura of violence is not entirely removed, the reference to the beer permits another reading, namely, one of pathos, stagnation, and hopelessness.

The novel’s first ten stories repeatedly portray this atmosphere of paralysis, anger, and despair. The protagonists watch the homeless beggars, “garbage can–foraging beggars” (S, 74); they are victims of social stagnation, having little to do but “hang out” (S, 63). Somewhat removed from the districts’ vagrants, the protagonists too are victims of the violence and “blunt hatred” (S, 100) that spills into the streets. It is an urban portrayal of violence and hopelessness felt to be generic to Neukölln: “As the guy reached to grab my red blouse, all I could think was that he wanted to strangle me. It is the third time this year that a complete stranger has screamed ‘you cunt’ at me” (S, 99). The pervading atmosphere of loneliness, fear, and resignation in all of the Neukölln stories is captured in the portrayal of an alcoholic caretaker rubbing his Venus flytrap against passersby in the hallway, persuading it to bite—“Go on, Hasso, grab!” (S, 97)—and by the arsonist, killed by his own fire in the attic of an apartment building, whose naked charcoaled body closes the section on Neukölln. These vignettes function as sociograms of a specific population, of a group of people of varying ages and occupations in an area of Berlin that appears relatively unchanged by the events of 1989 and, perhaps in consequence, steeped even further in historical irrelevance. But politically, it is also a critique of Germany’s singular obsession with a past that the novel suggests is stymieing Germany’s younger generation. Paradoxically, it is the West that is seen as stagnant and in need of reform and restructuring.

In keeping with this representation of Neukölln as a locus of historical paralysis, seven of the ten stories in the first section take place in a cemetery.
The cemetery’s juxtaposed realities that somehow coexist within the walls of Saint Thomas’s permit a reading of the cemetery as a heterotopic site, albeit somewhat less rigid than Michel Foucault’s interpretation. The cemetery in the text is a “real place,” but at the same time a “counter-site,” in which other possible uses “are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.” This ambiguity of space is made possible through the cemetery’s heterogeneous nature, its ability to juxtapose realities, and its function as a societal mirror reflecting the residents’ desires and frustrations. It is the primary theatrical setting for the episode of Rainer, a man in his mid-twenties looking for his girlfriend, who has disappeared. The cemetery becomes the locus of his desires, though what he desires is in fact absent. It is here that his grandmother, “the only person I know” (S, 67), was interred, and so it is a key focus of reciprocal identification and meaning for him. Although she is buried in the cemetery, the impecunious Rainer “couldn’t pay for the family plot . . . and now the grave is no longer there. . . . it was a beautiful grave” (S, 66). He feels guilty because he could not pay for the upkeep, as a result of which her remains were removed, and he suffers the pain of her signifying absence: the visible grave. His afterthought, “It was a beautiful grave,” verbalizes both his pain and the desire for belonging. The removal should suggest a process of moving forward, of liberation, but Rainer is absorbed by the past to the point of paralysis. The cemetery is a site of longing and unfulfilled desire and in part mirrors the district of Neukölln.

Depressed by Neukölln’s violence, Katharina, the protagonist of the first and final stories in the second section, decides to move to Prenzlauer Berg in East Berlin. The East represents for all of the protagonists of the second section the promise of a new beginning. It is a shift from West to East that also marks a significant change in how Berlin’s topography is perceived and experienced: “Concepts like ‘East’ and ‘West’ are dated. Here something new, something different, has emerged” (S, 156). This something else is an illusion of Berlin—postpolitical, post-Wall, post–Cold War—as an urban blank space semantically cleansed of the past as the topography in Kaminer’s Schönhauser.
Allee. The shift in perception is to be understood as an epistemic shift, insofar as the knowledge gleaned from the visual encounters with Berlin’s urban fabric is significantly altered when compared with the encounters narrated in the previous ten episodes. For the younger generation, Prenzlauer Berg represents the promise of a new beginning and liberation from the dominant metanarratives that had shaped the lives of the ’68 generation and its successors. In contrast to Grass’s portrayal, the East for Dückers’s protagonists is the locus of tabula rasa—a new beginning for the historically mottled city.

“It really appealed to us, the white walls, the boxes, nothing apart from my bed and the thought [idea], of what it could be like here. Inside the apartment still unfinished and outside the new city” (S, 107). A reading of Katharina’s new apartment as a metaphor for Prenzlauer Berg would not be mistaken insofar as the analogy between the two sites lies in their state of newness and future promise. The white walls are similar to the blank urban space outside waiting to be reconstructed through an imaginative act—it is simply a matter of unpacking the boxes and beginning anew. The Sonnenburgerstrasse in East Berlin is for Katharina “a wonderful gray zone, no longer the East, and not yet West, just right, to discover oneself” (S, 108). The old East-West fears have dissipated—“I was always suspicious of the East before the Wende” (S, 108)—and the attraction now to this as-yet-undefined zone, a “wasteland of illegal bars and beer for three marks,” still “unfinished” at the time of the narrative (S, 107), is that it is “exciting, grotesque, extreme” (S, 60). What is missing from this perception as a site of potential renewal, as it was for the protagonist in the Delius text, is a critical engagement with Berlin’s complex topography. It is a naive celebration of infinite possibility that appears to ignore the inevitable temporality of this unfinished state of being.

In this second section, Dückers’s novel resists all historical complexities. As Ada, a protagonist in the second section, argues, “There are memorials everywhere in the city . . . and repetitive discussions in school on the Second World War . . . well, it is all rather backward” (S, 154). In an echo of the revisionist discourses mentioned above, Ada historicizes the past by suggesting that it has in fact already been dealt with, and it is now time to move on. It is a form of historical rejection that is enacted through her engagement with the city: “In the evenings we walked across the roofs in the Tucholskystrasse, saw the golden dome of the synagogue close up . . . below us the thuds of a Trip-Hop-Party, the Hamburger Bahnhof soaked in blue neon-light” (S, 108). It is an aerial perspective in which the subject is at once present and strangely removed from the city. Berlin is erratically perceived and randomly registered, as in the Grass text, but there are no further reflections on what is seen.
Whereas Fonty might have given a brief history of the historically Jewish district, the words Tucholsky, Synagogue, and Bahnhof appear to merit no deconstructionist analysis or reflection. Ada and her friends are at all times engaged in the immediacy of surface, even as the text distances itself from this mode of urban engagement.

This advocacy of an alternative way of looking at the city is also extended to the people who live in it. Katharina’s hope of self-experimentation, “to discover oneself” (S, 108), is linked to her perception and experience of East Berlin. The East is a gray zone, something that can be subjected to de- and reconstruction and, by extension, identity and sexuality, which are shown to be equally plural and malleable. The protagonists equate the city’s changeability, as witnessed by the massive restructuring, with seemingly infinite possibilities of self or being-in-the-world. This awareness of identity as something unfixed and beyond the immediate realm of interpretation is pursued through two protagonists in their early twenties, Felix and Kiki, both of whom embody the eponymous play zone associated with Prenzlauer Berg and insist on playing with their gendered appearances: “I really want to dress up as a man today” (S, 130). Felix and Kiki change their disguises and cross-dress frequently; they perform gender impermanence by making gender play synonymous with current fashions and trends. Felix remarks: “I believe also that women will be completely abolished. The current fashion makes boys from men, although not girls from women, but instead, they also transform them into young men” (S, 134)—a clear nod to the simulacra.

In a similar vein, Ada insistently forces confrontations of essentialized femininity and gender performance in all of her sexual and nonsexual encounters. The androgynous Ada is caught between gender games that allow boys to become girls or vice versa, and she finds a politicization of the female body as deeply alienating as she finds the reconstruction or gentrification of the East.45 Against a singular logic of sexual identity, she brutally mutilates her own body. In doing so, she attempts to redefine her own gendered body as a

45. In the many instances of Ada’s sex games, the gender of the sexual partner becomes increasingly insignificant, or at least something that is not considered permanent and fixed. “Schliesslich knien sich Ada und Nils nebeneinander auf den Boden, ihre Körper sehen fast gleich aus, ihre schmale Hüften, ihr haarloser Anus, ihre kindlichen Schultern. Moritz schliesst die Augen und weiss nicht mehr, in wen er eigentlich eindringt” (Finally, Ada and Nils kneel down next to each other on the ground, their bodies looking alike, their small hips, their hairless sphincters, their childlike shoulders. Moritz closes his eyes and doesn’t know whom he is actually penetrating) (116). That their bodies are only “almost” (fast) the same underlines that rather than claim to have become one or the other, male or female, the gender performance permits a temporary dissolution of both for the duration of the game.
heterogeneous and strangely genderless site. At the moment in which her male friend arrives dressed as a woman, Ada removes a knife from her pocket, lifts up her T-shirt, and cuts off the nipple of her left breast—this act reappropriates her body and her gender-based identity and liberates it from the dominant performance: “From the left almost like a boy, from the right like a girl, and I’m in the middle” (S, 128). A physical middle point echoing Prenzlauer Berg’s undefined space perhaps, “a wonderful gray zone,” neither one thing nor another. Her relationship to her body is problematized in the same way as her interaction with the city—in relation to the city, she transforms open spaces into private-public ones. She “poaches” her body in the same way she poaches the city: she makes possibilities “exist as well as emerge,” namely, a nondefinable but potentially rich middle. That is, she makes possible a space in the city in which if not an authentic, then at least a semantically problematized, self can perform.

**Conclusions**

In light of the questions raised and reopened by the physical changes to Berlin’s topography as discussed in film and literature, there are significant socio-political questions left unanswered by those opposed to a continued negotiation with the past. A subjective and singular engagement with the past, as advocated by Walser in the Friedenspreisrede, is, as Delius’s Berlin novel reveals, prone to paranoia and persecution angst, not to mention an uncritical historical perspective. There is a clear indication in the Delius and Grass texts that remembering, collectively speaking, is a moral and social obligation from which the new republic should not shrink. The Delius and Grass texts are negotiating narratives about making sense of the world. The memory of Nazism is not only about remembering the catastrophes of the twentieth century but also, something that is absent in the reconfigured historical memory advocated by Schirrmacher et al., about remembering the moral and political consequences of them.

However, their Berlin portrayals raise the question of whether it is possible to have too much history. Fonty’s insistent historical perspective limits his individual functioning both privately and socially—through his Fontane resemblance, which culminates in the loss of his own name (in the novel he is

46. Michel de Certeau refers to this reappropriation of the city as “poaching,” which suggests that it is possible to “use” the city in unconventional ways (The Practice of Everyday Life, trans. Steven Rendall [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984], 98).
47. Certeau, Practice of Everyday Life, 98.
always referred to as Fonty, the mythical-biographical name, and not Wuttke, his actual family name), does the text not inadvertently show that Berlin is a historical quagmire in which the contemporary German could be lost? It is also possible to take issue with Grass’s historicity because it is profoundly intimate: it presupposes a learned familiarity with German and European history, not to mention a detailed knowledge of Berlin and its landmarks. This intellectual intimacy ultimately thwarts the claims that the only way to truly know a city is to critically and consciously engage with its complex layers. There is the danger, no matter how learned, of being simply off the mark. Delius’s text is critical of historical erasure, but it is nonetheless conscious of the limits of a cultural mnemonics in relation to the past sixty years of German history—which the Grass text is not. There is a degree of paralysis in both texts because of their inability to move freely in a historically saturated framework, that is, Berlin’s topography.

Kaminer’s Berlin short stories, on the other hand, are representative of a new literature in post-Wende German writing that has, it would appear, heeded Schirrmacher’s call for an end to the Gesinnungsästhetik. The narrative concentration, in both the Dückers and Kaminer texts, on a decidedly young and apolitical generation, on the social outsiders, immigrants, transsexuals, and the culture of Ich-AG, makes visible a thematic shift in contemporary literature. The portrayals offered are rich and persuasive, insofar as they address a contemporary Berlin and Germany from a shifted aesthetic perspective, and one that is not in evidence in the weighty tomes of the German literary canon. However, it is a perspective lacking references to the past, even though Dückers’s text is significantly framed by West German literary aesthetics, as the considerations of historical or ahistorical framing testify. But this attempt to (post?)modernize German literature to make it, in “Schröder-German, fit for the future,” albeit a parenthetical one, is of limited appeal. Historical memory is shaped by how the present selectively negotiates the past and a parenthetical historical memory will harvest moral and political consequences. Further, this attempt appears to ignore the weighty social and political role that literature continues to play in contemporary Germany—an expectation that cannot be so easily shaken off.

There are also significant differences in modes of literary representation. Structurally, there is a complexity in the Grass and Delius texts that acknowledg

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48. Ich-AG (Me, Inc.) is a program started by the German government to lend financial support to the unemployed in starting up a business.
edges the narrative complexity inherent to topographical representations—this complexity is not to be found in the Dückers and Kaminer texts. In the latter texts is a limited perspective: social, cultural, and historical. Both texts focus largely on two streets but portray them as somehow representative of cultural and social shifts in Berlin. Perhaps, given the absence of the past, the present can be offered only locally, denuded, as it were, of any wider context. This is not to say that only history matters in relation to Berlin—Dückers and Kaminer offer significant testimonies to a changing German or Berlin culture—simply put, Schirrmacher’s rejection of the *Gesinnungästhetik* does have worrying social and political implications, particularly if it ignores the debates that have helped shape postwar German identity and society and in consequence promotes a generation of German or Berlin representations from which the pasts have been parenthetically cleansed. The importance of each of these texts, however, is in their insistence on debating issues of considerable social, political, and cultural significance through Berlin’s troubled cityscape and in doing so paradoxically foregrounding rather than rejecting an aesthetics of conscience that is always already situated in a discourse of remembrance.