
ARTICLE – RETHINKING MINOR LITERATURES

Minor, Mainstream or Situational? Eva Menasse's *Tiere Für Fortgeschrittene*

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This article explores the relationship between minor, mainstream and situational positionality in the work of Eva Menasse. Menasse can be categorized as a second-generation Jewish writer, an Austrian writer and a woman writer, and this theme of multiple affiliations or situational positionality lies at the heart of her novels and short stories. The paper will focus on her short story collection *Tiere für Fortgeschrittene* (2017) to explore the way in which her writing challenges received narratives to move beyond binary and linear concepts of 'Austrian' and 'Jewish' identity, and indeed of the 'minor', towards a more multi-faceted and mobile concept of situational positionality.

Tweetable Abstract: Anita Bunyan explores the relationship between minor, mainstream and the more multifaceted and mobile concept of situational 'Austrian' and 'Jewish' positionality in Eva Menasse's *Tiere fuer Fortgeschrittene*.

'Power' is a central category in Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of 'major' and 'minor' literature. According to them, while 'major' literature is, for example, connected to the "language of the state, the official tongue" and "the language of power", 'minor' literature is a literature of the relatively powerless – "the literature a minority makes in a major language" (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 16). It is also political in the sense that "every individual matter is immediately plugged into the political" and communal in that "what the solitary writer says already constitutes a communal action. [...] The political field has contaminated all statement, especially literature which finds itself positively charged with the role and the function of collective, and even revolutionary utterance" (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 16, 17).

It is interesting to consider the writing of the novelist Eva Menasse in the light of this socio-political definition of 'minor' literature. She identifies and is frequently marketed as a second-generation Jewish writer who seeks, in her work as an author and a contemporary public intellectual, to break the silence about, in particular, the Austrian past.¹ As a second-generation writer, she has sought to challenge what she regards as an official culture of silence and repression of suffering on the part of the postwar Jewish communities, especially in

¹ See, for example, Schmitz. On the theme of breaking the silence in Austria, see Reiter 6, 9. On Austria's 'belated culture of remembrance', see Krylova. On Menasse as a Jewish-Austrian writer, see Reiter 122–9.

Austria. In this respect, she could be seen to champion a 'minor' politics that gives expression to the experience of what might be considered a relatively powerless social group and those who have remained without a voice. As we shall observe, however, this rather reductive definition of 'Jewishness' can be contested, as it links 'Jewishness' to categories of powerlessness and victimhood in a problematic fashion.

This article will focus on two narratives from Menasse's most recent collection of stories, *Tiere für Fortgeschrittene* [*Advanced Studies in Animals*], published in 2017. Both stories deal overtly with the second-generation Jewish experience and this article will explore the extent to which they might be said to give expression to a 'minor' politics and literary aesthetic. In 2018, Menasse won the prestigious Austrian Book Prize for *Tiere für Fortgeschrittene*. A central theme of the collection is the power of the past and the eight narratives cast a forensic eye on the everyday lives of contemporary Austrian and German protagonists, many of whom are trapped by their memories. Jakob, the uncompromising protagonist of "Schlangen" [Snakes], for example, is haunted by the memory of his recently divorced wife, which he finds he cannot discard as easily as their shared furniture. The narrative implies a link between memory and Jakob's musings about the deep-rooted pine trees of the surrounding Brandenburg countryside that can never be completely removed: "ans Ende der Pfahlwurzel wird man nie gelangen. Man kann sie nicht ziehen wie einen Zahn" [you would never reach the end of the taproot. You can't pull it like a tooth] (*Tiere* 269²). In keeping with the idea that 'minor' politics constitutes a revolt of the hitherto powerless, the narratives of "Haie" [Sharks] and "Enten" [Ducks] link Jewishness to traumatic memory, anxiety and shame, but also to a burning desire for justice and self-expression.

"Enten" focuses on the strained marital relationship between Jenna, a Jewish-Austrian woman, and her German husband, Ben, as they drive south from Brandenburg with their young son, Sammy, to set up a new home in Italy. Jenna's over-anxious parenting and travel anxieties are initially presented with a degree of ironic detachment. Refusing to allow her son to sit by the window of the car, the external narrator's free indirect narrative allows the reader access to Jenna's thoughts:

Sammy wäre lieber am Fenster gesessen, aber wenn er sich beschwerte, pries sie ihm den Platz damit, dass er zwischen ihnen hinausschauen konnte, als wäre er vorn mit dabei. Der Statistik zufolge stirbt der Beifahrer als erstes. Daran dachte sie jedes Mal, wenn Ben und sie nach den vom ADAC empfohlenen anderthalb Stunden die Plätze tauschten. Sein Fehler würde sie das Leben kosten. Das galt auch umgekehrt, aber davor hatte sie, solange sie am Steuer saß, keine Angst. Sie war zwar überzeugt, dass man die Schuldgefühle ein Leben lang nicht loswerden würde, was für einen selbst offenkundig viel quälender wäre als tot zu sein. Aber solange sie fuhr, hatte sie es in der Hand. (*Tiere* 278)

[Sammy would have preferred to sit by the window, but when he complained, she praised the middle seat by pointing out that he would be able to look out through the gap between them, as if he were there in the front. According to statistics, the front-seat passenger is the first to die. She thought about that every time when, after every hour and a half, as recommended by the German Automobile Association, she and Ben swapped places. She would pay with her life for his mistake. The reverse was also the case, but as long as she sat at the wheel, she was not afraid of that. Of course, she was convinced that you would never ever get over the feelings of guilt and that would obviously be more agonising than to be dead. But as long as she was in the driving seat, it was in her hands.]

² Translations into English are my own.

The mounting references to Jenna's anxious disposition culminate in a description of her suffering a severe panic attack when the car's satellite navigation system leads them into a claustrophobic dead end in the streets of Florence, where even the walls of the street take on a threatening intensity:

Das Navi wurde zu etwas halb Lebendigem, Bösem, das sie ins Unglück zog, in immer engere Winkel führte bis in eine Sackgasse, in der man nicht mehr wenden konnte. Und dort würde etwas Grauens passieren. Außer Jenna ahnte das niemand. Ihre Vorahnungen waren das einzige, was sie am Ende retten würde. Die rostrot gekalkten Wände schoben sich links und rechts näher, als hätten die Häuser verborgene Füßchen. (*Tiere* 305)

[The satnav almost acquired a life of its own, turning into something evil that led her into misfortune, driving her into increasingly tight corners and finally into a cul-de-sac where you couldn't turn around anymore. And there, something horrific would happen. No one, apart from Jenna, suspected that. In the end, her premonitions were the only thing that would save her. The rust-red limewashed walls pushed ever closer from left and right, as if the houses had little hidden feet.]

By this point, though, the narrative has revealed that Jenna's anxieties and shame-inducing panic attacks are rooted in her Jewish family's experience of persecution. Although she has no first-hand experience of persecution, her postmemorial trauma focuses on vividly imagined scenes of departure and familial separation, which are brought into especially sharp relief by her own experience of parenthood (*Tiere* 276, 286).³

Wenn sie versuchte, sich die Abreise ihres Vaters damals vorzustellen, verdunkelten sich die Bilder. Als hätte man in den eigenen Gedanken eine Sehstörung. Finster und kalt, Menschenmassen, die auf gespenstisch-lautlose Weise hysterisch waren. In der Bildmitte ihre Familie, in historischen Kostümen. Die Großeltern und der halbwüchsige Onkel in der Bewegung eingefroren, nur ihr kleiner Vater, der gar nichts verstand, zappelte. Er hatte diese übergroßen Kinderaugen, die ihm nicht allein gehörten, sondern allen armen Kindern der Welt und der Geschichte. Alles in Schwarzweiß, ein alter Film ohne Ton. Wenn Jenna autoaggressiv aufgelegt war, stellte sie sich als Untermalung Klaviermusik vor, wie zur Stummfilmzeit üblich. Walzer, Polka, Marschmusik. Der Führer schickt die Juden auf den Zug. In all den Jahrzehnten, die sie mit dieser Szene verbrachte hatte, hatte sie sich kaum verändert. (*Tiere* 276–7)

[When she tried to imagine her father's departure at that time, the images grew dark. As if one's own thoughts were visually impaired. Dark and cold, masses of people, hysterical in a way that was ghostly and silent. In the middle of the picture, her family in historical dress. Grandparents and teenage uncle frozen in motion. Only her small father, who had no understanding of things, wriggled about. He had these oversized child's eyes which didn't belong to him alone, but to all poor children of the world and of history. Everything in black and white, an old silent film. When Jenna was in an auto-aggressive mood, she imagined piano accompaniment, as was common in the age of silent films. Waltzes, the polka, marching music. Hitler sends the Jews off in the trains. In all the decades that she had spent with this scene, it had scarcely changed.]

³ On the concept of 'postmemory', see Hirsch.

“Umgeben” [Surrounded] or “durchdrungen” [permeated] (*Tiere* 277) by this family history of fear, separation, deterritorialisation and death, Jenna struggles increasingly with its far-reaching psychological effects. A Jewishness experienced as an early tendency to parsimony and as “unappetitliche kleine Angstreste, eines Tages doch enttarnt und verhaftet zu werden” [unsavoury little remnants of fear that one day you would indeed be discovered and arrested] at border crossings has now given way to acute anxiety: “Geiz war bisher ihre schlechte Eigenschaft gewesen, die verkrampfte Sorge um eine Zukunft, die einen vergessen ließ, die Gegenwart zu genießen” [Miserliness had been her bad habit up until now, a tense concern about the future which prevented you from enjoying the present] (*Tiere* 290). The motif of anxiety is compounded by that of the shame she experiences when she contrasts her quotidian problems to those faced by her grandparents: “Alltag? Das war ein Luxusproblem, das gab es damals nicht” [The problems of everyday life? That was a luxury. It didn't exist then] (*Tiere* 300).

As she grapples with her own marital problems, Jenna is conscious of the potentially fatal dangers of failed relationships for her Jewish grandparents' generation, especially for Jews in mixed marriages: “Mit dem Geld und dem Ansehen verspielt man in Wien auch die Beziehungen. Und das wurde lebensgefährlich. Was der Großvater nicht hatte wissen können” [In Vienna, along with your money and reputation, you could also squander relationships. And that became highly dangerous. Which Grandfather couldn't have known] (*Tiere* 285). Her anxieties also feel shameful in comparison with the suffering endured by her parents who were separated from their own parents as children and survived the Holocaust: “Mit minderen Problemen als dem Tod wollten Jennas Eltern nicht belangt werden” [Jenna's parents didn't want to concern themselves with problems less pressing than death] (*Tiere* 309). Jenna is convinced that her father, a ‘Kindertransport’ child, has suppressed the “lebenslanges” [life-long] trauma (*Tiere* 301) of childhood separation by presenting it stoically as a youthful adventure (*Tiere* 294). This unintended deprecation of her problems, indeed of her whole existence, is a psychological burden, relieved only by Jenna's hopes for the third generation. Her almost rebellious reflection “dass Überleben nicht ohne weiteres als höchstes Gut anzusehen war” [that survival was not necessarily the greatest good] (*Tiere* 302) is counterbalanced by her ability to rejoice in her young son's comparatively carefree existence: “Er schaffte, was sie nicht gekonnt hatte, er ging von klein auf angstfrei und neugierig in die Welt” [He managed what she could not. From a young age he approached the world without fear and with curiosity] (*Tiere* 315).

The motif of the persecuted child appears in many of Menasse's narratives and gives vivid expression to the powerlessness experienced by both first- and second-generation Jewish survivors of the Holocaust. It could be regarded as a recurrent feature of Menasse's ‘minor’ politics and also of a ‘minor’ aesthetic which allows her narratives to explore concepts of powerlessness and power, victimhood and perpetration, innocence and guilt. The narrative of “Enten” establishes tragicomic parallels between Jenna's father's perilous journey as a ‘Kindertransport’ child, waiting anxiously in his best suit on the platform of the Westbahnhof in Vienna, and her absurdly overprotected son who travels “beschützt von seinen Akademiker-Eltern, in einem mit grinsenden Schlangen bedruckten, TÜV-geprüften Kindersitz in den Süden” [southwards, protected by his educated parents, in a grinning-snake-print safety seat which has passed its MOT] (*Tiere* 301). In Jenna's imagination, both boys, with their unnaturally large “Kulleraugen” [big round eyes], are conflated into “eine einzige, zu beschützende Kinderfigur” [the single figure of a child in need of protection] (*Tiere* 310) for which her generation of “Überlebensstrophäen” [trophy survivors] must assume responsibility (*Tiere* 293).

The story “Haie” [Sharks] reworks the motif of the persecuted child and explores the possibility of creating new forms of minoritarian community and solidarity. Here, the central

protagonist's second-generation Jewishness leads her to forge a bond of solidarity with an ostracised migrant child in contemporary Berlin. Observing proud family groups on their way to celebrate their children's first day at school, "Nora empfand es als einen Morgen voller Einigkeit und völkerverbindender Harmonie" [Nora felt it to be a morning full of unity and a harmony which brought nations together] (*Tiere* 212). But the motif of the sharks in the title of the story alerts the reader to the fact that Nora's idealism, and that of Berliners who take such pride in their multicultural local neighbourhoods, is wishful thinking. The narrative of "Haie" focuses on the suspicious and mistrustful, almost febrile, atmosphere of Nora's daughter's primary school community in Berlin. Nora's instinctive solidarity with immigrants (*Tiere* 243) is tested when, on the first day of school, her daughter Clara develops an intense dislike of a somewhat overbearing little boy in her new class. As the school year wears on, Nora finds herself empathising with the allegedly 'difficult' six-year-old Muslim boy, Frederic, the child of wealthy Middle Eastern immigrant parents rumoured to belong to a mafia-like criminal clan: "Und sie fand es nicht richtig, zufällige Untergruppen mit Eltern zu bilden, nur weil sie so ähnlich waren wie sie, weiß, gebildet, deutschsprachig" [And she didn't think it was right to form random subgroups with parents just because they were so similar to her; white, educated, German speaking] (*Tiere* 221). A number of incidents, such as the deliberate cutting of a child's satchel strap and reports of aggressive behaviour, lead parents and children to ostracise Frederic and his family, despite Nora's increasingly energetic attempts to rationalise the events, stick to the facts and defend the small boy's actions. Something about Frederic's plight, that of the ostracised child, awakens her sympathy (*Tiere* 225). Even Nora is conflicted, though, and cannot prevent herself from suspecting that it is indeed Frederic who cut the straps of Clara's satchel (*Tiere* 222).

A link is established in "Haie" between the rumours of mafioso threats and intimidation circulating among Nora's friends and the increasingly exclusionary and scapegoating behaviour of the parents and school authorities towards the little boy. Almost involuntarily, Nora draws a connection between such conduct, which lies beyond the grasp of the law, and scapegoating by the Nazi regime, only to find that the sense of shame she associates with her Jewishness resurfaces: "Es ist genau wie mit den Arisierung, sagte Nora plötzlich laut, und alle schauten sie an. Sie wurde rot" [It's exactly like the Aryans, Nora suddenly said out loud, and everyone looked at her. She blushed] (*Tiere* 229). Similarly, when she speaks out in defence of Frederic at a parents' evening, she once again finds herself the object of the dominant parental group's gaze: "Mehrere Augenpaare starrten sie an. Warum geht dir das so nahe, fragte eine, die bisher wenig gesagt hatte. Nora schüttelte verzweifelt den Kopf. Ich habe das Gefühl, hier wird einer zum Sündenbock gemacht, begann sie" [Several pairs of eyes stared at her. Why is that such a big deal for you, asked one woman who had said little up to now. Nora shook her head in despair. I have the feeling that someone's being made into a scapegoat here, she began] (*Tiere* 240).

By the end of the story, Nora is alone in her empathy for Frederic, isolated from the mainstream of "Mittelstands-Eltern" [middle-class parents] who are glad to see the back of the boy when he is withdrawn by his concerned and "zu sichtbar" [too visibly] wealthy (*Tiere* 234) parents from the state primary and sent to a private school where, they convince themselves, he will get the attention he clearly requires. Meanwhile, other immigrants with children in the class, such as a Turkish family who conform to what they consider to be mainstream middle-class values, customs and self-image, are celebrated: "Diese säkulare, kopftuchfreie Familie mit dem hart arbeitenden Handwerker-Vater galt als Musterbeispiel aufrichtigen Bemühens, fähig zur echten Integration. Bei allen Schulbuffets pries man ihr Couscous" [This secular, headscarfless family whose father was a hardworking skilled tradesman was regarded as the perfect example of honest effort, capable of real integration. At every school fete people

praised their couscous] (*Tiere* 236). But as soon as there is conflict, it is implied, the relaxed and innocent appearances and consciences of the primary school parental group belie the fact that, as the title of the story suggests, in reality, like sharks, they constitute a threat. "Langsam bewegte sich die Gruppe von ihr weg, plaudernd, lachend, entspannt, vollkommen unschuldig. Nora ging allein davon" [Slowly, the group moved away from her, chatting, laughing, relaxed, completely innocent. Nora left on her own] (*Tiere* 243). Worst of all, by the end of the narrative she is alienated from her partner Paul who, in a chilling moment, is revealed to be the source of the rumour regarding the immigrant family's alleged criminality.

In the vulnerable figure of Frederic, in whom Nora perceives something "Schlaues und Verletztes, das sich nicht erwischen lassen wollte" [sly and wounded, that could not be pinned down] (*Tiere* 237), she seems to see something that invokes involuntary memories of her own childhood as a second-generation Jewish daughter in postwar Austria: "Kinder in diesem Alter hatten doch längst Geheimnisse, sie schämten sich für so viele unverständliche Dinge. Sie hatten begriffen, dass ihnen verschiedene Rollen nützen konnten, je nach Gesprächspartner. Obwohl sie sich Sorgen um Clara machte, blieb sie einen Moment stehen" [Children at that age had indeed long had secrets, they were ashamed of so many things they didn't understand. They had realised that it could be useful to play different roles, depending on the interlocutor. Although she was concerned about [her daughter] Clara, she stopped for a moment] (*Tiere* 237). In this situation, which can be seen as constituting a brief moment of revolt, when the adult Nora encounters little Frederic outside the school principal's office, it seems that her Jewish identity asserts itself over the maternal side of herself and she expresses solidarity with the powerless migrant child. Nora's Jewish and maternal identities prove to be situational: There are multiple facets to her minoritarian identity, but in particular situations of encounter or conflict, different aspects of this identity come to the fore.

Menasse's 'minor' politics could be said to find expression through a tragicomic aesthetic. The serious themes and the melancholy, even pessimistic, everyday situations in her work are presented from a humorously ironic perspective. The narratives make extensive use of visual and situational comedy which draws on the aesthetic of the comic strip. In the plot of "Enten", Jenna's desire for autonomy and self-realisation expresses itself in the bathetic and furtive purchase of a garish plastic toy "mit karikaturhaften Augen" [with caricature eyes] for her son (*Tiere* 311) and in "Haie" Nora attends a school parents' evening where "Die Lehrerin dagegen blieb stehen, oder sie lehnte an ihrem Erwachsenentisch, während sie alle da hockten wie auf dem Topf, die Knie bei den Ohren" [The teacher, by contrast, stayed standing or she leaned against her desk for grown-ups while they all crouched there, as if on potties, their knees up to their ears] (*Tiere* 220). The tragicomedy is consistent, however, with the cultural practice of a Jewish community that employs humour as a conscious strategy for coping with events and memories that threaten to overwhelm it. Silence and humour, Jenna ruminates, are family strategies: "Erkrankungen wurden grundsätzlich verschwiegen. [...] Das Thema Krankheiten nur in Form von barschen Witzen" [Illnesses were absolutely not discussed. (...) The theme of illness only in the form of pointed jokes] (*Tiere* 309). Humour is combined with a degree of emotional distance, which enables these individuals to avoid the "Sog in Richtung der uralten Katastrophen" [undertow pulling them in the direction of the catastrophes of long ago] from which they are not confident they would be able to re-emerge: "Und vielleicht war genau das die Technik, die man in ihrer Familie seit Generationen beherrschte" [And perhaps that was precisely the technique which her family had perfected generations ago] (*Tiere* 316).

Jewishness is not only linked to anxiety, shame and trauma, however. It also manifests itself in the stories as a combative desire for justice and self-expression. Jenna reflects on her second-generation role as a custodian of truth about the past in Austria and Germany and on her obligation to take the revolutionary step of revealing it openly: "Sie war der Platzhalter

einer Wahrheit, die sich nicht mehr bergen ließ" [She was the custodian of truths that could no longer be concealed] (*Tiere* 277). The plight of the migrant child energises the side of Nora that is "so kampfeslustig und kohlhaasisch" [pugilistic and Kohlhaasesque] (*Tiere* 225), where the intertextual reference to the Kleistian protagonist Michael Kohlhaas, whose quest for justice leads him into criminality, suggests that Menasse's short narrative involves an appropriation and modern rewriting of the German novella tradition. Both stories constitute self-reflexive gestures towards the potentially disruptive role of Menasse's 'minor' narratives within German-speaking literary and political discourse. The strong autobiographical connections between the second-generation Jewish author and the protagonists of the narratives strengthen this impression of 'minor' intervention and disruption.

However, on closer inspection, the categories of social identity and power, so central to Deleuze and Guattari's analysis of, for example, the work of Franz Kafka, are revealed in Menasse's narratives to be highly situational. From thematic, authorial and narrative perspectives, it is difficult to categorise Menasse's writings unequivocally as examples of 'minor' literature. In her narratives, 'Jewishness' is not always a 'minor' social identity. In addition, the social identity of the protagonists cannot be reduced to that of the second-generation Jew. As Myrto Aspioti argues in relation to the protagonist of Menasse's novel *Quasikristalle* (2013), minoritarian identity is rarely clear-cut. Jenna and Nora also have gender, familial, professional and national identities that intersect with and complicate their second-generation Jewish experience. The multifaceted and situational character of their social identities is underscored by the fact that these two protagonists appear in more than one story by Menasse. This narrative intersectionality is a characteristic feature of her prose. Jenna makes an appearance as a supporting character in "Schafe" [Sheep], another story in *Tiere für Fortgeschrittene*, and Nora is also the main protagonist of "Habgier [Greed]" which appears in Menasse's first collection of short stories, *Lässliche Todsünden [Venial Mortal Sins]*, published in 2009. "Habgier" focuses not on Nora as an Austrian mother in Berlin, but on her professional identity as a Jewish-Austrian freelance journalist who causes a political scandal in Vienna when she uncovers compromising historical film footage which destroys the career of a right-wing political celebrity. In "Habgier", Nora's 'minoritarian' situation and her psychology as a freelance female artist and Jewish daughter are defined by her increasingly conflictual relationship with a mainstream and highly paternalistic Jewish-Viennese familial and social circle represented by her father and Richard Bialik, an influential old family friend:

Niemals sollte Richard Bialik behaupten können, dass sie aus Eigensinn einen geopfert habe, den er für anständig hielt. Das wog schwerer als alle Schelte ihres Vaters, ihren Geschäftssinn betreffend. (Todsünden, 247)

[Richard Bialik must never be allowed to claim that her obstinacy had caused her to sacrifice someone he considered to be decent. That weighed more heavily than any complaints her father might have had about her business acumen.]

Nora's situation demonstrates that in Menasse's narratives 'Jewishness' and the 'minor' are not necessarily synonymous.

From authorial and thematic perspectives, Menasse's work can be categorised as writing that focuses not just on 'minor' or 'mainstream' Jewish experience, but also on familial and gender identity.⁴ Nora's and Jenna's identities as partners and mothers are central to both narratives. The main focus of "Enten" is the strained marital relationship between Jenna and

⁴ On Menasse as a 'woman writer', see Seemann 35–51.

her husband, Ben, undoubtedly exacerbated by the deep-rooted anxieties that have shaped her since childhood but also affected by the gendered expectations that inform the couple's roles and identities as parents. Narrated from Jenna's perspective, as they drive south to Italy, the narrative reflects on whether their marital interactions are "genervt oder liebevoll-ironisch" [irritated or affectionately ironic] (*Tiere* 276). Theirs is a relationship on a tightrope: "Auf dieser unerforschlichen Schneide balancierte ihre Ehe seit einer Weile, von beiden Seiten aus" [Their marriage had been balancing on this unfathomable tightrope for some time, from the perspective of both sides] (*Tiere* 276). Outwardly content, they are internally trapped in the "banalen, aber morastigen Winkel, in denen eine an sich glückliche Ehe feststeckte" [banal but constricted swamp in which apparently happy marriages get mired] (*Tiere* 282). "Haie" foregrounds Nora's identities as a partner and mother who has set up home in a new country: "Ihre kleine Tigerfamilie" [Her little tiger family], Nora ruminates, is "fest zusammengeschmiedet in der Fremde" [has been firmly welded together away from home] (*Tiere* 213). This familial solidarity is, however, tested by her identity as a second-generation Jewish daughter and the associated affinity she feels for the ostracised immigrant boy, Frederic.

Jenna and Nora could also be seen as deterritorialised Austrians who have migrated to Berlin. Indeed, only two of the central protagonists of *Tiere für Fortgeschrittene*, both elderly or middle-aged men, are rooted in their Austrian and Brandenburg surroundings. The other narratives, including "Haie" and "Enten", feature protagonists on the move, on road trips, or in transitional spaces such as hotels, holiday resorts and visiting artists' residences. This migration of the characters highlights the situational and often fluid nature of social identity. It is not just that their identities are characterised by multiple affiliations; rather, the relationship between these facets of the protagonists' identities is situational. In Nora's case, for example, it is particularly evident that her identity as a member of a minority group is situational. In Vienna, the setting of "Habgier", she is set apart from what could be called mainstream Austrian society by her Jewishness, but in mainstream Jewish circles it is her gender, generation and precarious economic status that set her apart. In Berlin, the setting of "Haie", by contrast, Nora is not a freelance artist and Viennese Jew, but primarily a mother and an Austrian adjusting to the customs of a city where everyone seems to have minority status: "bei ihr zu Hause maß man dem ersten Schultag nicht dieselbe Bedeutung zu wie hier, in dieser großen Stadt, die in so unglaublich viele Minderheiten zerfallen schien" [At home, they didn't attach as much significance to the first day at school as they do here, in this big city which seemed fragmented into an incredibly large number of minorities] (*Tiere* 213). In Berlin, language is a marker of the Austrian identity which sets Nora apart from other German parents in the neighbourhood primary school who claim that their children are victimised by the immigrant boy:

Deutschsprachig, du, hänselte Lydia, die regelmäßig behauptete, bestimmte Wendungen aus Noras Heimat noch nie, aber im Leben nicht gehört zu haben. Das muss ich mir merken, rief Lydia dann immer ein kleines bisschen zu laut. Aber sie merkte sie sich nie. Und außerdem, sagte Lydia, bilde ich keine Weißengruppe, sondern eine Opfergruppe, ist das denn Zufall, deiner Meinung nach, dass nur unsere Kinder. (*Tiere* 221)

[You, a German-speaker, teased Lydia who regularly claimed never before, indeed never before in her life, to have heard certain expressions from Nora's homeland. I must remember that, Lydia then exclaimed, always just a little too loudly. But she never did. And besides, Lydia said, I'm not forming a group of whites, rather a group of victims, do you think it's a coincidence then that it's only our children.]

Similarly, Jenna is conscious that, as an Austrian, she cannot identify with the German historical experience that her husband tries to transmit to their son, “die normalerweise mit dem Satz *früher gab es, wie ihr wisst, zwei Deutschlands* anfangen. Damals, im Wiener Lachkabinett, wusste sie wenig von Deutschland, und dass es in zwei Teile gehackt worden war, hätte sie vermutlich gerecht gefunden” [which normally began with the sentence *As you know, in the past there were two Germanys*. At that time, in the Viennese comedy booth, she knew little about Germany and she would probably have found it quite fair that it had been chopped into two pieces] (*Tiere* 303). This consciousness of, even quite subtle, linguistic and historical differences links Austrian and migrant identities and complicates the basis on which Menasse's narratives can be defined as ‘minor’ literature.

The interpretation of Menasse's narratives as second-generation Jewish ‘minor’ literature is further complicated by the author's biography as the child of a Catholic mother of Moravian descent. Indeed, several stories in Menasse's collections, most notably “Hochmut” [Pride] in *Lässliche Todsünden*, concern themselves with the second-generation perpetrator experience. “Zorn” [Anger], another story from this earlier collection, focuses on the strained relationship between a mother, Ilka, and her young son, Joshi, both of whom appear to be consumed by an ill-defined rage whose source remains unexplained. Ilka and a grown-up Joshi reappear in *Tiere für Fortgeschrittene* as supporting characters in “Raupen” [Caterpillars], which tells the story of Konrad, an elderly Austrian man, and his tragicomic attempts to care for his demented wife, Grete, in the family home. The narrative gradually reveals the fact that they are the parents and grandparents of Ilka (also known as Helena) and Joshi respectively, and also the parents of a now deceased daughter, Fiona – a fragile and damaged woman whose troubled relationships featured in another story, “Gefräßigkeit” [Gluttony]. In “Raupen”, the Austrian family emerges as a source of love and support, but there are also strong implications that the source of the family tensions, resentments and deep-rooted anger lies in the nation's fascist past.

“Raupen” elicits a degree of sympathy for Konrad's point of view (*Tiere* 90). Narrated primarily from Konrad's free indirect perspective, it lays bare the domestic challenges and indignities of living with a family member who has dementia. He is “verwitwet, obwohl sie noch da ist” [widowed, although she is still there] (*Tiere* 63) but works tirelessly to keep his wife clean, safe and at home. He resists his daughters' attempts to secure state help for their mother, reflecting on the seductive nature of words such as the “Dienstleistungsgesellschaft” [service economy] in which his daughters have faith but which, in his view, mask a transactional relationship that can never replace the quality of familial care (*Tiere* 62). A degree of narrative irony also reveals him to be a stubborn man, prone to bouts of self-pity, who imagines himself alternately as a medieval knight, defending his wife against what he regards as his cold-hearted daughters (*Tiere* 61) or, in an implied reference to his Austrian Catholic background, as a version of the stoic martyr, Saint Sebastian: “Endlich einmal waren sie sich einig, diese beiden, und gewannen damit eine ungeahnte Macht. Wie der Heilige Sebastian ließ er die Pfeile in sich eindringen, stand er wieder bis zum Knöchel in seinem Seelenblut, doch aufrecht, ohne zu wanken” [For once they were in agreement, these two, and as a result gained an unexpected degree of power. Like Saint Sebastian, he let the arrows pierce him, standing once again up to his ankles in the blood of his soul, but upright, without wavering] (*Tiere* 58). Konrad is fully aware that his daughters view him as authoritarian and worse: “Beratungsresistent, sagte Helenas Stimme. Dienstleistungsgesellschaft, sagte Katharina. Gefängniswärter, Tyrann, Nazi, Arschloch, sagte Fiona” [Impervious to advice, said Helena's voice. Service economy, said Katharina. Prison guard, tyrant, Nazi, arsehole, said Fiona] (*Tiere* 76). The possibility that Fiona's accusatory reference to him as a ‘Nazi’ should be read literally rather than figuratively provides a clue to the source of the family's troubling anger and

anxiety. Helena's choice of names for her own family could be read as attempts to distance herself from German culture by adopting the name Ilka, the Hungarian version of Helena, and by giving her son a Hebrew name, Joshua. The troubled behaviour of the sensitive and wayward Joshi, "dieser unberechenbare, halbkriminelle Bursche" [this unpredictable, semi-criminal lad] (*Tiere* 56) who can be calmed only by his grandmother, suggests that the perpetrator community's legacy of repression and anger has been passed on to the innocent third generation. There is a clear parallel, and perhaps even an implied sense of community or solidarity, between Ilka's second-generation anger and the anxiety experienced by the Jewish daughter figures, Nora and Jenna; together they give narrative expression to the complicated legacy of the Austrian past in which, as in the biography of Eva Menasse, victimhood and perpetration, powerlessness and power, the 'minor' and 'major' can often be found in combination.

On a formal and not just thematic level, the multi-perspectival narrative patterns of Menasse's writing also challenge the binary and overly schematic categories of 'minor' and 'major' literature. Menasse has written about her interest in "Muster, Lücken, Strukturen" [patterns, gaps, structures] and the representation of themes, motifs, characters and spaces from a variety of spatial and temporal perspectives is a central aspect of her narrative approach.⁵ The multifaceted situational identities of Menasse's protagonists resist reductive categorisation. Narrative perspectives are relativised, especially when the protagonists feature in more than one story. In "Schafe", for example, Jenna and her family are supporting characters and the objects of the main protagonist's observations about his sojourn in a visiting German scholars' residence in Italy. A psychologist, he is trained to analyse the characters and produce "Porträtskizzen" [portrait sketches] of those around him. Jenna is first introduced to the reader through his probing perspective: "Zu ihr fällt einem das Wort intensiv ein, wobei schwer zu sagen ist, ob sich diese Intensität eher in die positive oder negative Richtung entlädt. Heftige Empathie und kühler Hochmut, Lebenslust und Verzweiflung, sie scheint aus Gegensätzen zusammengeklebt" [Intense was the word that struck you about her, although it was hard to say whether this intensity would unfold more in a positive or a negative direction. Powerful empathy and cool arrogance, love of life and despair, she seemed crafted out of contradictions] (*Tiere* 135). "Enten", by contrast, is narrated mainly from Jenna's free indirect perspective as she surveys her marriage with a new degree of detachment brought about by the family's road trip southwards: "Auch in ihrer Ehe saß sie im Brückenrestaurant und sah die Bewegungen aus kühler Höhe" [In her marriage too she was sitting in a restaurant on a motorway bridge, observing the movements below from a cool distance] (*Tiere* 290).

The narratives emphasise the fact that multiple 'versions' of reality are possible and that the truth about relationships is always a matter of perspective. Jenna, for instance, notes wryly that she had originally interpreted her husband's "grenzenlose Unaufmerksamkeit" [boundless inattentiveness] (*Tiere* 281) as an endearing form of "intellektuelle Zerstreutheit" [intellectual absentmindedness] (*Tiere* 290). She is conscious that her parents' narrative about her marriage is quite different from the one she would construct: "Deshalb hielten sie an jenem kränkenden Mythos fest, der aus Ben geradezu den Dompueur eines Wildtiers machte. Und aus Jenna die Hauptgewinnerin im Männer-Lotto" [They clung therefore to the hurtful myth that cast Ben as a virtual lion-tamer. And Jenna as someone who had won first prize in the national husband lottery] (*Tiere* 281). Indeed, all the stories in *Tiere für Fortgeschrittene* call into question the narratives that the central protagonists construct for themselves. The narrator of "Schafe" reflects explicitly on this issue as he mulls over how to present himself and his

⁵ See her biographical entry on the website of the Villa Massimo, the Deutsche Akademie in Rome, where she held a visiting Fellowship in 2015: <https://www.villamassimo.de/de/stipendiaten/eva-menasse>.

work to the group: "Schließlich gibt es verschiedene Möglichkeiten dessen, was ich über mich sagen könnte" [In the end there are different ways of presenting myself] (*Tiere* 137).

This exploration of the protagonists' situational identities over time and space is reinforced by the intriguing narrative connections established between places in the short story collections *Lässliche Todsünden* and *Tiere für Fortgeschrittene*. The semi-private, reassuring space of the local 'Beisl', or bistro pub, the Blaubichler – a quintessentially Viennese space which perhaps functions as a microcosm of Viennese middle-class society – features as a more or less important setting in many of the narratives in *Lässliche Todsünden* and *Tiere für Fortgeschrittene*, establishing intriguing spatial and personal interconnections between the narratives. These interconnections blur genre boundaries by hinting at the idea that the collections of stories actually constitute a social novel, exploring aspects of contemporary middle-class Viennese and Berlin society from a variety of perspectives.

Menasse's narratives of situational identity reveal the category of the 'major' to be just as problematic as that of the 'minor'. From an authorial and thematic perspective, Menasse and her Jewish-Austrian protagonists, whose families are rooted in pre-war Vienna, could be seen as representatives of a 'major' literature or culture, especially when contrasted to the migration narratives of transnational authors such as Katja Petrowskaja and Sasha Marianna Salzmann. Moreover, the white, middle-class, affluent protagonists can also be considered as representatives of a global cultural or intellectual elite which possesses great cultural power and capital, but whose impotence in the face of contemporary political, social and environmental challenges is satirised by the narratives. This is a description that could apply to Menasse herself, who embraces the role of the public intellectual and is not afraid to intervene publicly in political and social debates.⁶ At the same time, she is keenly aware of the limits of her influence as a writer in relation to the overwhelming power of the internet:

Dramatisch aber ist, dass sich die Öffentlichkeit als solche, die sich damals erst gebildet hat als eine Gegenöffentlichkeit zum Staat, gerade komplett auflöst. Ihre Bestandteile sind zwar noch da, aber so fragmentiert wie das Mikroplastik in den Ozeanen. Wen wollen wir denn heute noch erreichen, wenn wir in der Paulskirche sprechen, wenn wir in der NZZ oder in der FAZ schreiben?⁷

[What is dramatic though is the way that the public sphere, which emerged originally as a counterweight to the state, is right now completely breaking down. Its component parts still exist, but they are as fragmented as pieces of microplastic in the ocean. Who exactly are we trying to reach when we speak in Frankfurt's St Paul's Church or when we write in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* or in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* newspapers?]

Menasse's narratives also reveal that the putative power of those who possess cultural capital can be deceptive. "Schafe", in which Jenna features as a supporting character, is a coruscating satire on the ineffectual attempts of contemporary German intellectuals to rise to the global challenges of their age. The plot revolves around the exploits of a group of creatives from Germany, one of whom is Jenna, who find themselves figuratively and then literally imprisoned in a supposedly paradisiacal artists' residential centre in Italy. The nature and location of the institution are only gradually revealed by the narrator, a German psychologist who is recovering from a breakdown. The artists and intellectuals, "die ausgewählten Künstler und Denker der Nation" [the select artists and thinkers of the nation] (*Tiere* 179) as the narrator

⁶ See her collection of essays and public speeches, *Lieber aufgeregt als abgeklärt*.

⁷ Menasse 2019.

notes sardonically, are given absurd little tasks to accomplish and riddles to solve by the shadowy director and bureaucrats who run the institution. They spend days working as a collective to unlock the deeper meaning behind a series of picture postcards distributed by one of their number until he admits that the images were completely random, thus rendering their efforts utterly futile (*Tiere* 176). Gradually worn down by the oppressive and increasingly threatening Italian heat, the cowardly, submissive, but now increasingly hysterical group of Germans summons the courage to rise up against the bureaucrats who deny them air-conditioning (*Tiere* 169). They storm the pavilion that contains the air-conditioning apparatus, only to get locked in for several excruciating days and nights (*Tiere* 171). This comically absurd course of events culminates in a narrative climax when the narrator is revealed to have hidden the key to the pavilion and suffers another psychological collapse (*Tiere* 179). The powerlessness and utterly ineffectual activity of the arrogant collective is then again vividly emphasised by the revelation that the key has been found by the intelligent guesswork of a child – Jenna's son, Sammy (*Tiere* 178). All this comedy satirises a tragic reality. The intellectual "Geplänkel" [squabbles] and the self-serving ideological self-positioning and "Geweihschau" [posturing] (*Tiere* 146) of the nation's best and brightest are totally unequal to the social, global and environmental challenges of the age. Paralysed by anxiety, inertia and a cowardly submissiveness to authority, this pathetic "ängstliche Gesellschaft" [anxious society] cannot even sort out the air-conditioning, let alone save the planet which carries on revolving "obwohl sie ununterbrochen schmutziger, voller und gewaltttätiger wird" [although it continues to get dirtier, more crowded and more violent]. Belief in the power of the cultural elite to effect progress is replaced by the end of the narrative with this philosophy of eternal recurrence, which Europe's cultural and social elites are powerless to alter (*Tiere* 180). At the very least, this conclusion suggests that Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of the 'official tongue' and the 'language of power' might need to be rethought, because the location of the 'major' or 'mainstream' is increasingly difficult to establish in a world where, in some sense, 'all becoming is minoritarian' (Deleuze and Guattari 2013, 123).

The powerlessness of mainstream society in the face of overwhelming global challenges is reinforced by *Tiere für Fortgeschrittene's* series of self-absorbed, inflexible and self-pitying male protagonists who together constitute a satire on contemporary concepts of masculinity defined by work, tempo, competition and transactional relationships with women. These human flaws are not the preserve of the male protagonists, however; they reflect a wider society characterised by lack of personal commitments to other humans, to nature and to the wider world (*Tiere* 205). The story "Igel" [Hedgehog], for example, whose main protagonist finds a hedgehog in the grounds of a luxury hotel sporting a plastic collar from a discarded fast-food beaker, exposes the polluting activities of fast-food companies and satirises the ineffectual forms of empathy and virtue-signalling on the part of a wealthy middle class that profits from such businesses (*Tiere* 123). Yet, as with Nora's brief but powerful connection with Frederic, these fleeting, if apparently ineffectual, moments of solidarity provide some respite from the melancholy underlying many of Menasse's narratives. Moreover, their rhizomatic character holds out the possibility of fruitful connections. To quote from Deleuze and Guattari's later publication, *A Thousand Plateaus*:

[U]nlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; [...] It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (milieu) from which it grows and which it overflows. [...] In contrast to centred (even polycentric) systems with hierarchical modes of communication and preestablished paths, the rhizome is an acentred, nonhierarchical, non-signifying system without a General and without an organizing memory or central automaton, defined solely by a circulation of states. (Deleuze and Guattari 2013, 21–2)

The narratives of *Tiere für Fortgeschrittene* are alert to the fact that power is often situational and decentred. This diffuse nature of power is encapsulated briefly in “Haie” in the image of the city of Berlin as a decentred space where there is no centre of power but multiple forms of power relationships. One of the achievements of *Tiere für Fortgeschrittene* is to demonstrate through narrative the situational or positional nature of power. When read together, these stories reinforce the situational character of Jenna’s and Nora’s power and of their intersectional identities. They challenge received narratives to move beyond the binary concepts of ‘German’ (or ‘Austrian’) and ‘Jewish’ identity, perpetration and victimhood, mainstream and minor, towards a more multifaceted and mobile concept of situational positionality.⁸ This has perhaps less in common with Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the ‘minor’ and more with their concept of the new, eternally ‘becoming’ subject.⁹

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⁸ For more reflections on situational positionality, see Adelson 244–55. See also the conclusion that writing by Jews in Germany up to 2005 also seeks “to find a way out of its ‘either-or’ dilemma” in McGlothlin 232.

⁹ See Deleuze 1994.

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