

Memory in Contemporary German Prose by Jenny Erpenbeck and Judith Schalansky

by

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To Jamie
my love, my light

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Introduction

German reunification in 1989/1990 resulted in a memory boom.¹ The Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the German Democratic Republic (GDR), which had been coming to terms with the Nazi past under different political systems, were prompted by reunification to consider their shared history. Moving forward, the most recent (East) German past would need to be assimilated into future conceptualizations of Germany. The narrative that came to dominate understandings of the GDR was one of socialist dictatorship. The label dictatorship served to code reunification as the inevitable dismantling of an unjust state and allowed for the assumed seamless reintegration of East Germans into German capitalist democracy.

Almost immediately after reunification, and most prominently since the early 2000s, former GDR citizens began to look back on the absent referent, East Germany, as a source of positive identification. A post-reunification East German identity emerged in tandem with contemporary memory practices that highlighted everyday life under

¹ For a detailed analysis of Germany's post-reunification memory boom and how it relates to Germany's two dictatorships, see: Huyssen, Andreas. *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003. Print. and Fuchs, Anne and Mary Cosgrove. "Introduction: Germany's Memory Contests and the Management of the Past." *German Memory Contests: The Quest for Identity in Literature, Film, and Discourse Since 1990*. Ed Anne Fuchs, Mary Cosgrove, and Georg Grote. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2006. 1-21. Print.

socialism and the material culture of East Germany. However, as Andreas Huyssen points out, “the act of remembering is always in and of the present, while its referent is of the past and thus absent.”² Varied and contesting forms of remembrance engaging with the absent reference, the German Democratic Republic, continue.³

Contemporary German literature is one such form. Authors Jenny Erpenbeck and Judith Schalansky are at the center of my dissertation. They are two strong voices on the literary landscape that have not received much scholarly attention. Though Erpenbeck is gaining traction in both German *Germanistik* and US-American German Studies. Within their varied oeuvres, Erpenbeck and Schalansky also grapple with remembering multiple facets of the GDR—from the banal to the oppressive. Both were born in the German Democratic Republic, though they belong to slightly different generations. Erpenbeck was in her twenties at the time of German reunification, and Schalansky was about ten years old. In working through modes of remembering the GDR, Erpenbeck and Schalansky also work through broader questions about memory, remembering and forgetting, the relationship between materiality and memory, and female subjectivity.

Jenny Erpenbeck is best known for the complexity of her narrative style. Sentences wind around the reader, and she uses familiar words to tell unfamiliar stories in unexpected contexts. Her writing is simultaneously inviting, intimate, distancing, and even unsettling. Erpenbeck entered the literary scene with *Geschichte vom alten Kind* (1999). In 2001 she won the Ingeborg Bachmann Competition Jury Prize for her short story “Sibirien,” which

² See: Huyssen, Andreas. *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003. Print. 3-4.

³ Cultural historian Paul Betts notes: “Just as the actual content of history has been up for grabs, so too has the very form of remembrance.” In Betts, Paul. “The Twilight of Idols: East German Memory and Material Culture.” *The Journal of Modern History*. 72.3. (2000): 731-765. Print. 738.

is published in the collection *Tand* (2001). Erpenbeck followed *Tand* with two family novels: *Wörterbuch* (2004)⁴ and *Heimsuchung* (2008).⁵ With these novels, she revealed her preoccupation with German history, which can also be found in *Aller Tage Abend* (2012). Presumably a family novel, the five chapters in *Aller Tage Abend* do not focus on multiple generations of one family. Instead, they trace one woman's life as she is born and dies throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The *Intermezzi* briefly interrupt narration in order to present an alternate possibility that is then taken up by the subsequent chapter—What if the child had not died in her crib? What if the young woman had not committed suicide? What if the woman survives the trials of history? Due in part to its inventive structure, *Aller Tage Abend* made the long list for the German Book Prize in 2012, and it received the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize in 2015. Most recently, Erpenbeck published *Gehen, ging, gegangen* (2015) about refugees in Germany.

However, in one slim volume, *Dinge, die verschwinden* (2009), Erpenbeck weaves together history and memory in stories about disappearing spoons, wardrobes, socks, and lawnmowers. Erpenbeck also tells the story of a different kind of disappearance—that of

⁴ *Wörterbuch* tells the story of a girl growing up in an unnamed dictatorship who learns that she was adopted by supporters of the state after her parents were killed. Even though the dictatorship under which the girl lives is never named in the novel, Erpenbeck heavily researched a similar case in Argentina, which serves as the historical foundation for her novel. *Wörterbuch* also contains parallels to cases in Nazi Germany where children were re-homed according to government dictates. There are further parallels with cases in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) where children were adopted out of “anti-socialist” households. Neither the novel nor this brief comparison intends to conflate the historically, politically, and geographically distinct dictatorships. Rather the comparison highlights the ways in which Erpenbeck utilizes research as a foundation for narrating stories that are simultaneously material-specific and abstract-universal.

⁵ *Heimsuchung* is the story of a house, the land upon which it rests, and its various occupants from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century. Through the land, the house, and the materials in the house, the novel connects Germany's Prussian past to the Weimar Republic to Nazi Germany to the GDR toward the post-reunification present. Individual human narratives are contextualized by ever widening understandings of historical and natural time. Furthermore, Erpenbeck explored her own family's history while writing *Heimsuchung* and included autobiographical fragments in the novel. See: Erpenbeck, Jenny. Interview by Maren Schuster and Martin Paul. “Man kann sich sein Verhältnis zur Vergangenheit nicht aussuchen.” *Planet Interview*. 1. Sept. 2008. Web. 29 Jan. 2014.

grandmothers, childhood, ways of life, and even of authorship. The final word of the collection is incomplete “verschw...” instead of “verschwinden.”

Jenny Erpenbeck studied book binding and set design and worked on operas before devoting herself to writing. In contrast to Erpenbeck, who identifies as a literary author, Judith Schalansky aligns herself more with the design and production aspects of literature, though her own writing is strong. From a design perspective, she is best known for her editorial curation of the *Naturkunden* series (2013-present) with the publishing house Matthes & Seitz. She also designed Clemens J. Setz’s novel *Indigo* (2012) as well as the 50th anniversary volume for the *Literarisches Colloquium Berlin* (2013).

In addition to her book design work, Schalansky has written two novels: *Blau steht dir nicht* (2008) and *Der Hals der Giraffe* (2011). Both use complex narratives to tell stories about girls and women from the German Democratic Republic. To date, *Blau steht dir nicht* has received little critical or scholarly notice. In contrast, *Der Hals der Giraffe* was a bestseller and has garnered a fair amount of attention. It made the long list for the German Book Prize in 2011 and won the prize for most beautiful German book in 2012. In 2015 Stuttgart selected *Der Hals der Giraffe* for their citywide reading program. Stuttgart also hosted a staging of the play based on the novel as part of their programming.

Despite how celebrated Erpenbeck and Schalansky are and their fairly established place in the German literary landscape, there has been little scholarship done on their work. Of the two, Erpenbeck has received more consideration, in part because her literary oeuvre is significantly larger. Schalansky’s design work is briefly mentioned in Alexander Starre’s *Metamedia: American Book Fictions and Literary Print Culture after Digitalization* (2015), a volume largely dedicated to male authors and designers. Thus my dissertation

provides much needed analysis of Erpenbeck's and Schalansky's literary texts. It offers the first critical engagement with the Jenny Erpenbeck's short story "Im Halbschatten meines Schädels" from *Tand* and, to my knowledge, the first close reading of Judith Schalansky's debut novel *Blau steht dir nicht*. I locate Jenny Erpenbeck and Judith Schalansky within German literary history before analyzing how they write about memory as it relates to gender and materiality.

In the realm of contemporary German literature, both Jenny Erpenbeck and Judith Schalansky belong to the Third Generation East, a self-created, fluid, generational category encompassing those born in the 1970s and 1980s in the German Democratic Republic.⁶ The category has further expanded to include those born after German reunification but who still have a positive identification with the lost referent. Erpenbeck and Schalansky grew up in the GDR, and they came of literary age in reunified Germany. Third Generation East authors tend to thematize a childhood that ends parallel to reunification, cite the *Wende* as the central biographical turning point of their lives, comment on the physical destruction and disappearance of childhood landscapes, and combat feelings of loss through the circulation of childhood (East German) objects. However tenuously, Jenny Erpenbeck and Judith Schalansky are writing this type of contemporary literature, what some have also labeled contemporary East German literature.

The term "East German literature" when used to describe texts published after reunification is a contested one. Since 1989/1990, scholars have approached literature emerging from the former GDR and the new federal states through a variety of lenses. In

⁶ Third Generation East is a sociological concept developed from the *Initiative 3te Generation Ost*, which was founded in 2009. The group published a collection of multiple autobiographical stories from divided Germany. See: Hacker, Michael, ed. *Dritte Generation Ost: Wer wir sind, was wir wollen*. Bonn: BpB, Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung, 2012. Print.

his introduction to the edited volume *WeiterSchreiben*, Holger Helbig outlines four categories of East German literature after the end of socialism: 1) *Umschreiben* 2) *Weiterschreiben* 3) *Nachschreiben* and 4) *Neuschreiben*.⁷ With *Umschreiben*, Helbig refers to both the rewriting of GDR literary history after it was revealed that presumed dissident authors such as Christa Wolf and Sascha Anderson had also worked as unofficial informants for the *Stasi*. *Weiterschreiben* addresses a set of canonical GDR authors, among them Christoph Hein, who began their literary careers within the GDR and continued writing and publishing after reunification. With *Nachschreiben*, Helbig identifies censored texts written in the GDR that could only be published after reunification. Finally, with *Neuschreiben* Helbig refers to the generation(s) of authors with East German biographies who only started publishing after reunification. *Neuschreiben* encompasses the Third Generation East and certain texts by Jenny Erpenbeck and Judith Schalansky.

Scholarly engagement with contemporary East German literature continued with the 2009 volume of *GegenwartsLiteratur*, which focused on what it called *Neue ostdeutsche Literatur*. In 2013 the Literature Archive in Marbach hosted a seminar on *Neue ostdeutsche Literatur*. The lower case and adjectival use of East German acknowledges the demise of the German Democratic Republic as well the presence of its cultural aftereffects. In formulating his approach to well-known feminist and postmodern author Sibylle Berg post-2001 prose, Frank Degler offers a series of alternate terms for contemporary East German literature: *ostdeutsche Perspektive*, *ostdeutsche Nachwendeliteratur* and *(Ex) DDR-Literatur*. While emphasizing the turn in Berg's novels toward the GDR, Degler does not label her work one way or the other. Instead, he focuses

⁷ Helbig, Holger. "Weiterschreiben. Zum literarischen Nachleben der DDR." *Weiterschreiben: Zur DDR-Literatur nach dem Ende der DDR*. Ed Holger Helbig. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2007. 1-7. Print.

on three key attributes he has uncovered: Berg's biographical link to the GDR, the fact that her stories take place in the former region of the GDR, and that the thematic context of her writing captures life in East/east Germany.⁸

The narratives by Jenny Erpenbeck and Judith Schalansky discussed in this dissertation are best located within the category of Third Generation East. They focus on childhood (Erpenbeck: *Geschichte vom alten Kind*; Schalansky: *Blau steht dir nicht*) and actively remember the GDR (Erpenbeck: *Dinge, die verschwinden*; Schalansky: *Der Hals der Giraffe*). Both Erpenbeck and Schalansky openly discuss their biographical connections to the German Democratic Republic, and these loose connections partially appear in their narratives.

While engaging with the theme of childhood in the GDR, Erpenbeck and Schalansky also raise larger questions about memory. They write and create nuanced texts that reflect on memory as it is refracted through narration, materiality, and female subjectivity. Going beyond their generations, they evoke a literary tradition that includes Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Ingeborg Bachmann, Christa Wolf, and W.G. Sebald. Unlike some of their contemporaries who either only write about positive memories of the GDR (e.g. Jana Hensel, Jacob Hein) or remain on the surface of the present (e.g. Benjamin von Stuckrad-Barre, Christian Kracht), Erpenbeck and Schalansky integrate pre-WWII German literary history as well as the Nazi past into their narratives.⁹

⁸ Degler, Frank. "Figurationen des Abschieds: Sibylle Bergs Experimentalpoetik u-topischer Neuanfänge" *GegenwartsLiteratur* 8 (2009): 122-147. Print.

⁹ Erpenbeck in particular is lauded by critics for staying away from both the unreflective nostalgia of some and the excessive use of brand names common to some of her contemporaries. See: Erpenbeck, Jenny. Interview by Philip Oltermann. *The Guardian*. 6 June 2015. Web. 9 June 2015. Also see Erpenbeck, Jenny. Interview by Katharina Döbler. "Großmutter's klein Häuschen." *ZeitOnline*. 30 May 2008. Web. 21 Aug. 2014.

There is a small group of contemporaries with whom Jenny Erpenbeck and Judith Schalansky can be compared. Traces of pain and its connection to the GDR from Jenny Erpenbeck's writing can also be found in Inke Parei's novels *Die Schattenboxerin* (1999) and *Die Kältezentrale* (2011). The novels *Alice* (2009) and *Aller Liebe Anfang* (2014) by Judith Hermann share with Erpenbeck's and Schalansky's works a sophisticated interrogation of female subjectivity and the contemplation of narration, aesthetics, and gender. The suffocating pressure of domestic life is also explored and critiqued in Anna Katharina Hahn's *Am schwarzen Berg* (2012). On a lighter note, Judith Schalansky shares with Clemens J. Setz and Judith Zander an absurded humor when writing about the German Democratic Republic.

Grounded as they are in memories of childhood, literary and cultural productions from the Third Generation East are often labeled and dismissed as nostalgic. However, there is critical potential in *Ostalgie* (neologism meaning nostalgia for the East). Daphne Berdahl understands *Ostalgie* to be a position from which capitalism and economic inequality can be critiqued.¹⁰ Thus Berdahl reads nostalgia for the East not as a positive identification with the German Democratic Republic, but rather as a move toward solidarity and collective memory. Furthermore, the material objects used to remember can only reference an East Germany that never existed.¹¹ Similarly, Svetlana Boym focuses on the longing attached to the lost object. Boym differentiates between restorative and reflective nostalgia. Whereas restorative nostalgia seeks to reinstate the lost object, and

¹⁰ Martin Blum assumes a similar position. See: Blum, Martin. "Club Cola and Co.: Ostalgie, Material Culture and Identity". *Transformations of the New Germany*. Ed Ruth Starkman. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. 131-154. Print. Charity Scribner understands *Ostalgie* as a challenge to mourning and melancholia in that it introduces disavowal into the binary. See: Scribner, Charity. *Requiem for Communism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003. Print.

¹¹ Berdahl, Daphne. "'(N)Olstagie' for the Present: Memory, Longing, and East German Things." *Ethnos*. 64.2 (1999): 192-211. Print.

thus reifies the past, reflective nostalgia acknowledges loss and allows for multiple ways to remember the lost object.¹²

In her short prose, Jenny Erpenbeck uses memory and nostalgia to critique capitalism. The narrators in “Diebesgut” embody the productive defiance that Berdahl sees as underpinning the post-reunification turn to East German products, though the glee Erpenbeck’s characters experience is produced by stealing West German consumer goods. The narrator of “Splitterbrötchen” exemplifies the interplay between dominant and oppositional memories. However, what Erpenbeck accomplishes with her prose, that has not yet been done to mass produced objects, is work through the layers of history and individual memory attached to a particular item. Thus the drip-catcher in “Tropfenfänger” has a story before and after the German Democratic Republic. Furthermore, Erpenbeck works through multiple disappearances of everyday objects and focuses primarily on loss rather than presence.

In working through disappearance and loss (of childhood, of everyday objects, of the GDR), Erpenbeck’s prose practices reflective rather than restorative nostalgia. That which is remembered is fragmented, immaterial, fleeting. Similarly, Judith Schalansky writes about loss through a reflective lens. The adult narrator in *Blau steht dir nicht* complicates her happy childhood memories of the *Ostsee* with the post-reunification knowledge that the sailors she so admired were actually border guards. Inge Lohmark in *Der Hals der Giraffe* resists the changes that reunification wrought on her family, the school where she teaches, and her hometown; however, the novel makes clear that she is

¹² Boym, Svetlana. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books, 2001. Print.

not the one telling her story. The gap between the narrator and the protagonist thus establishes a critical distance with memory and nostalgia.

While hesitant to identify as women authors, Erpenbeck and Schalansky write provocative stories that center female subjectivity. With their disgusting and unlikable protagonists (e.g. *Die Geschichte vom alten Kind* by Erpenbeck and *Der Hals der Giraffe* by Schalansky) they push against notions of female propriety. Furthermore, the one who remembers, not incidentally a woman, is foundational to their narratives discussed in this dissertation. Yet, to date, gender has played only a marginal role in *Ostalgie* discourse, and Erpenbeck and Schalansky are hesitant to identify with feminism and women's writing. In an interview with Wiebke Eden, Erpenbeck declared that she is not an *Emanze*—a hold-over term from the 1970s and 80s referring to emancipated women who were perceived to hate men.¹³ Schalansky also tends to avoid labels. However, Erpenbeck and Schalansky, along with working within a broader literary tradition also reference feminist literary history—echoes of Ingeborg Bachmann and Christa Wolf can be found in Erpenbeck's oeuvre and French photographer Claude Cahun haunts Schalansky's *Blau steht dir nicht*.

As a strong interlocutor for Erpenbeck, Christa Wolf actively identified with feminism. With "subjective authenticity" she centered women's experiences of socialism—from factories, to hospitals, to writing desks—in her writing. From her first novel, *Moskauer Novella* (1961), to her last, *Stadt der Engel oder The Overcoat of Dr. Freud* (2010), Wolf returned to the intersection of socialist ideology and lived (women's) experiences. In working through the aftereffects of socialism, Jenny Erpenbeck, too,

¹³ Erpenbeck, Jenny. Interview by Wiebke Eden. "Sich mit Worten auszudrücken, war immer das Nächste." *Keine Angst vor grossen Gefühlen: Die neuen Schriftstellerinnen*. Berlin: Edition Ebersbach, 2001. 11-22. Print.

focuses on women and female subjectivity. Both Erpenbeck and Schalansky engage memory and materiality through central female characters. They challenge traditional gender binaries and boundaries, though Schalansky's writing makes clear that gender continues to impact women's mobility.

Additionally, Erpenbeck and Schalansky thematize certain feminist concerns in their writing, for example: female subjectivity, the performativity of gender, and the oppressive nature of the domestic realm. In the narratives from Chapter One of this dissertation, gender is initially subsumed by the everyday, ordinary nature of the objects that the narrators encounter. However, it bubbles to the surface in the execution of "women's work"—e.g. clearing the table, cleaning rugs, repairing stockings, and using drip-catchers to ensure the whiteness of German tablecloths. In Chapter Two, gender is subversive. The child narrator from Schalansky's *Blau steht dir nicht* challenges the limited mobility imposed on her by the border of the German Democratic Republic and her assigned birth gender. Subversive in a different way, the female schoolteacher in *Der Hals der Giraffe* undermines maternal expectations in her relationship with her daughter and in her interactions with her students. The narrators from works by Jenny Erpenbeck, Angela Krauss and Christa Wolf from Chapter Three introduce forgetting and emptiness into the memory discourse. It is the women who seek to forget, and the men who attempt to compel them to remember.

Jenny Erpenbeck and Judith Schalansky also engage memory through material culture. Everyday material culture from the German Democratic Republic has quickly gone through various phases—garbage, display value, commercial value, social value, and memory value. Some items are still in everyday use and have retained their function if not

their context after reunification. An object (or type of object) can also exist in various stages simultaneously. However, as Benjamin Robinson, Eli Rubin, and Paul Betts have pointed out, everyday East German material culture did not and does not exist beyond the reach of the ideological.¹⁴

Erpenbeck's stories briefly connect to the past through material objects. The narrator in "Palast der Republik" allows a spoon to slip into her pocket. The drip-catcher evokes layers of German history, and the woman in "Splitterbrötchen" grasps toward the bread roll she remembers. Natural history and natural objects populate Judith Schalansky's novels. Jenny from *Blau steht dir nicht* eternally extends a piece of amber to the reader, while Inge Lohmark imagines her small town in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern overrun by nature. For Lohmark, the return to nature would be preferable to the musealization that is overtaking her life.

Chapter One of this dissertation unpacks the memory and display value of seemingly inconsequential everyday objects—from the personal to the commercial. Chapter Two examines the social and pedagogical value of natural objects. The narratives encountered in Chapter Three present a different approach to materiality and memory. They focus on forgetting and the nature empty vessels. Thus the objects are no longer attached to remembering, and the female protagonists in Jenny Erpenbeck's, Angela Krauss', and Christa Wolf's stories advocate for forgetting while struggling against becoming objects themselves.

¹⁴ See Robinson, Benjamin. *The Skin of the System: On Germany's Socialist Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009. Print., Rubin, Eli. *Synthetic Socialism: Plastics & Dictatorship in the German Democratic Republic*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. Print., and Betts, Paul. *Within Walls: Private Life in the German Democratic Republic*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. Print.

Chapter Outline

In the first chapter, “The Materiality of Remembering in Jenny Erpenbeck’s Short Prose,” I situate Jenny Erpenbeck’s texts within the literary legacy of East Germany’s best known female author, Christa Wolf. Furthermore, Erpenbeck writes with a particular attention to the staging and meanings of everyday material culture. Therefore, I analyze selections from Erpenbeck’s short story collection *Dinge, die verschwinden* (2009) against and alongside the specific practices of post-reunification memorial-museums of East German everyday culture. I argue that with her short prose, Jenny Erpenbeck uses memory, narration, and material culture to present a counter-narrative to contemporary museal practices.

In the second chapter, “The Landscape of Memory in Judith Schalansky’s Novels,” I analyze Judith Schalansky’s two novels *Blau steht dir nicht* (2008) and *Hals der Giraffe* (2011). Through the use of narration, photographs, and lithograph prints, Schalansky interrogates the cultural meaning of natural objects. Schalansky shows how natural objects enter the realm of social and cultural meaning. Similar to W.G. Sebald’s oeuvre, Schalansky’s two novels contribute multi-medial narratives to Germany’s ongoing memory contests. I argue that in *Blau steht dir nicht* Schalansky links the social function of displayed natural objects, such as amber, dried coral, and sea urchins, to the maintenance of East Germany’s geographical borders. In my reading of *Hals der Giraffe*, I argue that the East German landscape is presented through natural, cyclical time in an attempt to slow down the pace of German reunification and the anticipated musealization of East Germany.

In the third chapter, “The Materiality of Forgetting in Jenny Erpenbeck, Christa Wolf, and Angela Krauss,” I frame Jenny Erpenbeck’s novella *Geschichte vom alten Kind*

(1999) and short story “Im Halbschatten meines Schädels” (2001) with stories from and about the German Democratic Republic— Angela Krauss’ short story “Glashaus” (1987) and Christa Wolf’s novel *Leibhaftig* (2002). When read together, these complex, enigmatic stories reveal a careful balance between remembering and forgetting. In my analysis, I reveal the (temporal) space of the German Democratic Republic in the ever constricting spaces of an enclosed school building, apartments and hospitals, and finally, the room that imprisons the narrator in Erpenbeck’s short story “Im Halbschatten meines Schädels” (2001) in order to argue that the processes of forgetting, when linked to material objects, further create conditions of possibility for female narrative agency.

Chapter One

The Materiality of Remembering in Jenny Erpenbeck's Short Prose

In a 2008 interview, Jenny Erpenbeck stated: "Ich versuche zurück zu blicken, die Vergangenheit anzunehmen, aber dann auch zu sagen: Gut, ich geh weiter. Nicht in der Sentimentalität oder im Rückblick stecken zu bleiben."¹⁵ The interview itself was part of the promotion for *Heimsuchung* (2008) and the collection of stories *Dinge, die verschwinden* (2009).¹⁶ Both texts examine questions of narration, time, memory, and everyday material objects. Neither can be accused of sentimentality. Throughout Erpenbeck's oeuvre there is a tension between the precision and objectivity of her writing and the empathy that her writing evokes.¹⁷ Erpenbeck's sparse style has its roots in research, re-enactment, and performance, as well as experience.¹⁸ These (auto)biographical

¹⁵ Erpenbeck, Jenny. Interview by Maren Schuster and Martin Paul. "Man kann sich sein Verhältnis zur Vergangenheit nicht aussuchen." *Planet Interview*. 1. Sept. 2008. Web. 29 Jan. 2014.

¹⁶ The majority of the stories in *Dinge, die verschwinden* were originally published as a *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* column between 2007 and 2008.

¹⁷ See Erpenbeck, Jenny. Interview by Katharina Döbler. "Großmutter's klein Häuschen." *ZeitOnline*. 30 May 2008. Web. 21 Aug. 2014. and Erpenbeck, Jenny. Interview by Jörg Petrasch. "Abstand zum Leben." *taz, die tageszeitung* 25 Oct. 2001. Sec. Kultur: 27. *LexisNexis*. Web. 6. May 2015.

¹⁸ Johannes Birgfeld remarks on her "präzise ausgearbeitete[] Erzählperspektive." Erpenbeck, Jenny. Interview by Johannes Birgfeld. *Deutsche Bücher*. 31.3. (2005): 177-187. Print. 181. In his review of *Geschichte vom alten Kind*, Ralf Poerschke notes, "Allein von wonniger Ostalgie ist bei Jenny Erpenbeck nicht zu spüren. Wohl aber der ueberzeugende Anspruch, eigener Geschichte einen sehr individuellen literarischen Ausdruck zu verleihen—und ueber nichts zu schreiben, das nicht auf eine Art selbst erlebt wurde." Here Poerschke is directly referencing the two autobiographical moments that provide the "authentic" foundation for Erpenbeck's novella. For a time, Erpenbeck's grandmother Hedda Zinner

connections are mediated by layers of narration which emphasize the constructed nature of the stories.

In this chapter, I situate Jenny Erpenbeck's collection *Dinge, die verschwinden* within the literary legacy of East Germany's best known female author, Christa Wolf. In the first part of the chapter, I track how narrative treatment of East German material culture shifts between Wolf's *Was bleibt* (1979/1990) and Jenny Erpenbeck's post-reunification short prose. In contrast to Wolf, Erpenbeck writes with a particular attention to the staging and meanings of everyday material culture. Her narratives therefore offer a counter-narrative to contemporary practices typical of post-reunification memorial-museums focusing on East German everyday culture.

Part I: "Subjective Authenticity," Narration, and Display: *Was bleibt* After Christa Wolf

Born in East Berlin in 1967, Jenny Erpenbeck was twenty-two years old at the time of German reunification. In interviews, she has often spoken of the privileged position that her family's cultural productions in the German Democratic Republic afforded her during her childhood.¹⁹ While her family's biography and her childhood experiences provide

exchanged letters with a 14-year-old girl living in an orphanage. It was later revealed that the letters were actually written by a woman pretended to be an orphaned girl. Erpenbeck herself conducted experiential research for the novella by disguising herself as a teenager and returning to high school for a few weeks. Poerschke, Ralf. Rev. of *Geschichte vom alten Kind* by Jenny Erpenbeck. *taz, die tageszeitung*. 27 Jan. 2000. *LexisNexis*. Web. 6 May 2015. Also see: Erpenbeck, Jenny. Interview by Annkatrin Looß. *Die Welt*. 12 Nov. 1999. *LexisNexis*. Web. 21 May 2015, Erpenbeck, Jenny. Interview by Susanne Leinemann. *Die Welt*. 9 Feb. 2000. Web. 11 March 2014, and Erpenbeck, Jenny. Interview by Wiebke Eden. "Sich mit Worten auszudrücken, war immer das Nächste." *Keine Angst vor grossen Gefühlen: Die neuen Schriftstellerinnen*. Berlin: Edition Ebersbach, 2001. 11-22. Print.

¹⁹ Her paternal grandmother was Hedda Zinner, a well-known actress and writer in East Germany. Her paternal grandfather, Fritz Erpenbeck, was an actor and crime novelist. He also founded the magazine "Theater der Zeit." Her father, a philosopher, also published novels and her mother worked as a translator.

some material for her fictional narratives, Erpenbeck moves away from a purely (auto)biographical understanding of her writing:

Man muss, glaube ich, versuchen, die Dinge so gut zu kennen, als ob sie Teil der eigenen Autobiographie wären. Und genauso, wie man sich beim Schreiben von der eigenen Autobiographie dann in manchen Aspekten wieder löst, weil der Kern der Geschichte vielleicht woanders liegt, als er in Wirklichkeit gelegen hat, genauso löst man sich auch von dem Material, das man durch Recherche zusammengetragen hat.²⁰

Jenny Erpenbeck cites research, experience, family narratives, and her own re-enactments, such as returning to high school as an adult, as crucial foundations for her writing. The process of writing autobiographically, for her, parallels the process of writing fictional stories, in the sense that certain aspects are edited out. In this way, a story's core comes to be different from what was central to the experience or the researched documents. Thus, working through the essence of things (*Dinge*) leads to autonomous storytelling.

Though they are of different social and literary generations, Jenny Erpenbeck shares with Christa Wolf a similar approach to writing. In the mid-1970s, Wolf coined the term “subjective authenticity” as a way of explaining not only her writing aesthetics but also her position as a state-sponsored author in the German Democratic Republic. Christa Wolf belonged to the generation of East German authors who came of age during the *Aufbau* (building up) years of the GDR. Beginning with *Moskauer Novella* (1961) and ending with her final novel *Stadt der Engel oder The Overcoat of Dr. Freud* (2010), Christa Wolf's oeuvre works through a subjective understanding of political and material reality. Wolf wrote through and about historical moments: Nazi Germany—

²⁰ Erpenbeck, Jenny. Interview by Maren Schuster and Martin Paul. “Man kann sich sein Verhältnis zur Vergangenheit nicht aussuchen.” *Planet Interview*. 1. Sept. 2008. Web. 29 Jan. 2014.

Kindheitsmuster (1976); divided Germany—*Der geteilte Himmel* (1963); and reunification—*Was bleibt* (1979/1990).

Even though Wolf's writing was always entangled with East German socialism, she did not write completely within the aesthetic tradition of socialist realism. Socialist realism demanded the integration of the individual into socialist collectivity. Literature of the genre was typified by a third person, non-character bound, and omniscient narrator. The plots tended to follow a set mold—with the emerging hero solidifying his place in society while the non-conformist was excluded from the new order. Wolf's writing shifted the focus to the individual within society, and her work features first person female narrators. Wolf utilized stream-of-consciousness, Christian religious undertones of sacrifice and suffering, and a melancholic tone to situate the individual within her personal and historical context. Furthermore, Wolf's narrators often share facets of the author's biography.

What Christa Wolf accomplished with “subjective authenticity” was the creation of a subversive space where lived reality would be accurately and fairly represented within socialist paradigms.²¹ While the best example of Wolf's use of “subjective authenticity” is arguably *Nachdenken über Christa T.* (1969), it is her short novel, *Was bleibt*, published in 1990 but presumably written in 1979, that is most relevant for this chapter. Wolf's actions and writings surrounding the *Wende*, as well as the post-reunification revelation that she had very briefly been an unofficial informant for the state police, shifted public understanding of her as a dissident writer toward a more nuanced re-evaluation of how writing, narration, and authenticity functioned in the GDR and the GDR's afterlife. In his

²¹ For Wolf's discussion on the term see: Wolf, Christa. “Subjektive Authentizität”. *Die Dimension des Autors: Essays und Aufsätze Reden und Gespräche 1959-1985*. Darmstadt: Luchterhand Verlag, 1987. (1973) 773-805. Print.

evaluation of East German literature, Wolfgang Emmerich created a distinct binary between dissident and complicit authors.²² However, the events of 1989/1990 as well as the actions of so-called dissident authors themselves who spoke in favor of reformed socialism (e.g. Christa Wolf and Christoph Hein) fundamentally called into question Emmerich's categories. With *Post-Fascist Fantasies*, Julia Hell further demonstrated that Christa Wolf's texts consistently upheld the socialist fantasy of the anti-fascist father at the level of the family and at the level of the state.²³ In multiple speeches and essays given in defense of reformed socialism, Wolf highlights her and her generation's need for socialism and anti-fascism after the devastation of WWII.

Shortly after German reunification, Christa Wolf's *Was bleibt*, an autobiographically inflected short novel about an author under *Stasi* surveillance, came to encapsulate the debates surrounding the legacy of East German literature. Thomas Anz cites the text's content and timely publication as the reasons why it was so well suited to serve as the catalyst for the *Literaturstreit* in 1990, a debate that was never just about Christa Wolf.²⁴ In an interview with Günter Gaus, Wolf evokes the psychic space between remembering and forgetting to discuss her partial suppression of the reports she wrote for the *Stasi* between 1959 and 1962 in East Berlin and Halle. Furthermore, according to Wolf,

²² Emmerich periodizes the development of GDR literature in the following way: the 1950s as the pre-modern stage of socialist realism, the 1960s-70s as the modern stage of emerging individualization and critique of the state, and the 1980s as the post-modern gestures toward the future. While generally critical of GDR literature, Emmerich saw potential in East German theater, especially Heiner Müller's work, and lyric poetry. See Emmerich, Wolfgang. "Gleichzeitigkeit: Vormoderne, Moderne und Postmoderne in der Literatur der DDR". in *Die andere deutsche Literatur: Aufsätze zur Literatur aus der DDR*. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1994. 129-150. (1988).

²³ Hell, Julia. *Post-Fascist Fantasies: Psychoanalysis, History, and the Literature of East Germany*. Post-contemporary interventions. Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 1997.

²⁴ See: Anz, Thomas. "Es geht nicht um Christa Wolf": Der Literaturstreit im Vereinten Deutschland. München: Edition Spangenberg, 1991. Print.

the reports were edited after her meetings.²⁵ Christa Wolf's post-reunification working through of her engagement with GDR state power reveals potential gaps among experience, remembering, and forgetting, as well as what is lost or added through the (self)-editorial process. The *Literaturstreit* itself revolved around the political role of left intellectuals, the presumed divergent literary history of the GDR, and the problems of integrating that legacy into a larger narrative about German literature.

I read *Was bleibt* as an example of “subjective authenticity,” a work of fiction inflected with autobiographical claims, through which Wolf links herself to a state that no longer exists in order to reflect on her role of dissident author. The story begins in an apartment in East Berlin located near the German-German border on Friedrichstrasse. The narration fluctuates between stream-of-consciousness and sparse realism. Most of the narrative takes place in two enclosed spaces—the narrator's apartment as she prepares for the day and the room where she gives a public reading of her forthcoming novel. In the first pages of the story, the reader is led into the narrator's stream-of-consciousness, where it is made evident that she is searching for a new language. The new language would help her come to terms not with the material world, as evidenced by her interaction with the objects in her apartment, but rather the figurative world—the world of narration, the world of “subjective authenticity.” First of all, the new language would allow the narrator to begin to answer the question of what remains. While the story ends with impending cataclysmic hope at the conclusion of her reading: “Was bleibt. Was meiner Stadt zugrunde liegt und woran sie zugrunde geht. Daß es kein Unglück gibt außer dem, nicht zu

²⁵ Wolf, Christa. Interview by Günter Gaus. “Sich nicht davonstehlen.” 25 Feb. 1993. *rbb*. Web. 6 June 2015. For an analysis of how *Stasi* agents created hostile biographies with their notations and documentation see: Lewis, Alison. “Reading and Writing the Stasi File: On the Uses and Abuses of the File as (Auto)biography.” *German Life & Letters*. 56:4 (October 2003): 377-397. Print.

leben,”²⁶ the narrator remains committed to her new language, which had only just begun to grown in her: “meine andere Sprache, die in mir zu wachsen begonnen hatte.”²⁷

Secondly, the new language would help get her out of the paranoid cycle in which she is trapped. Her thoughts jump from question to question: “Aber würde ich spüren, wenn es an der Zeit ist? Würde ich meine Sprache je finden?”²⁸ She is anxious and alarmed. While getting ready for the day, she sees herself pulling the living room curtain back, looking for the ever present *Stasi* surveillance team. The narrator is constantly aware of the state and her potentially oppositional relationship to said state. It is her constant awareness of surveillance along with her attempts to grow into her new language that interrupt the flow of narration. As the story progresses, the narrator becomes more and more agitated and worries that everything she says and does is being recorded. She constantly asks: “Standen sie noch da?” The answer always seems to be yes—if not literally then figuratively in the feelings of oppression and the self-censorship and caution with which the narrator engages the world.

Ultimately, this new language, as one beyond description, would be capable of accurately relating the narrator’s experiences. The story begins with her internal monologue detailing her ever growing panic that she will not be able to access this new language. She presumably jumps out of bed at the sound of bells. The bed is implied, but not named. Rather she finds herself on the “schön gemusterte[] Teppich.”²⁹ The rug is the

²⁶ Wolf, Christa. *Was Bleibt: Erzählung*. Frankfurt am Main: Luchterhand Literaturverlag, 1990. (June-July 1979/November 1989). Print. 107-108.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 15.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 7.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 7.

first material object that the reader encounters. The rug is barely described, with no further information provided on the type of pattern or the quality of beauty pertaining to it.

The first page encapsulates the content and style of the story— a series of actions and thoughts narrated in the form of an internal monologue. The narrator, however oppressed she feels within her apartment, is fully comfortable with the everyday objects that share her space. As she proceeds with her day—showers, gets dressed, eats breakfast, picks up the newspapers, gathers the dirty glasses, and straightens up the tablecloth—it is her actions, not the objects themselves, that propel the narrative forward: “Gläser *zusammenstellen*, ein Lied *summen*...wohl wissend, alles, was ich tat, war Vorwand, in Wirklichkeit war ich, wie an der Schnur gezogen, *unterwegs* zum vorderen Zimmer, zu dem großen Erkerfenster, das auf die Friedrichstraße blickte...”³⁰ [emphasis added]. The lack of description or attention attached to the objects indicates that their presence is self-evident. They are merely part of the narrator’s everyday life. The rug, the newspapers, the tablecloth, the newspaper rack, the morning glasses—they are not individual items but rather objects of routine and habit. For example, when the narrator brushes her teeth (*putzte mir die Zähne*), there is no need to mention the necessary or potential accessories: toothbrush, toothpaste, water glass, etc. Functioning through their notation not the particulars of their materiality, the objects in the narrator’s home produce the effect of reality.³¹ That is to say, the objects recede into the background and provide a sense of realism to the narrative.

³⁰ Ibid, 9.

³¹ Barthes, Roland. “The Reality Effect.” *The Rustle of Language*. Trans Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1968. (1964)

For the narrator, it is important that her new language move beyond description of an object's external appearance: "Weiß, warum in den letzten Tagen ausgerechnet weiß? Warum nicht, wie in den Wochen davor, tomatenrot, stahlblau? Als hätten die Farben irgendeine Bedeutung..."³² She notes that in the past few days, the cars that have been observing her have all been white. For a moment, she questions the meaning of the car's color, its external appearance. Why are the cars no longer tomato-red or steel blue? Her exclamation, "Als hätten die Farben irgendeine Bedeutung..."³³ is a literary allusion to Gertrude Stein's modernist poetry and evokes Stein's collection *Tender Buttons* (1914). At the same time, it functions as a diegetic and temporal extra-diegetic refusal to attribute meaning to the agents' cars, which are also vehicles for and of the German Democratic Republic state apparatus. Within the story, the narrator obsesses about being under surveillance to the extent that every external detail has to mean something, and thus becomes meaningless.

Extending beyond the temporal and diegetic boundaries of the text, the refusal to attribute meaning to color also references Christa Wolf's rejection of her own complicity, as literary author and cultural agent, with the GDR. The new language that remains "würde aufhören, die Gegenstände durch ihr Aussehen zu beschreiben—tomatenrote, weiße Autos, lieber Himmel!"—und würde, mehr und mehr, das unsichtbare Wesentliche aufscheinen lassen." Her new language would move through external, superficial experiences inward toward subjective, authentic ones.

³² Wolf, Christa. *Was Bleibt: Erzählung*. Frankfurt am Main: Luchterhand Literaturverlag, 1990. (June-July 1979/November 1989). Print. 12.

³³ *Ibid.*

In the story, there is one object of note—the narrator’s writing desk. It is difficult to determine where in the apartment the desk is located. However, the narrator returns to it repeatedly. For example:

Ich stand wieder am Schreibtisch, hatte es aber vermieden, aus dem Fenster zu sehen. (Sie waren noch da.) Ich setzte mich und begann, die Eintragungen in meinem dicken grünen Taschenkalender nachzuholen, die ich in den letzten Tagen versäumt hatte. Einmal würde ich in einem Zimmer sitzen—ich stellte es mir kahl vor, ein normales Bürozimmer—, und man würde mir Fragen stellen.³⁴

It is from the site of writing, with her desk serving as a prop, that the narrator imagines herself the object of a *Stasi* interrogation. The interrogation would occur in a similar room, presumably outfitted with a desk just like hers. Thus her writings would be used as evidence against her in the imagined, uncanny site of interrogation: “[E]r würde mir aus meinem eigenen Notizbuch mit meinen eigenen Worten auf jede Frage die Antworten vorlesen, die ich eben noch so stolz verweigert hatte.”³⁵ Her private written words would thus betray her. Being under constant surveillance has made it impossible for her to write. The narrator is also hyperaware of both the external and internal censors that would dictate the contents of her writing; therefore, her writing desk becomes, to her, the site of torture.³⁶ The material object, the desk, is linked to writing as both a necessity and an impossibility in the production of an authentic self.

The narrator ventures out of her claustrophobic apartment in order to give a public reading. The final section of the story takes place in the room of the public reading. During the Q&A, a young teacher from the audience asks: “auf welche Weise aus dieser

³⁴ Wolf, Christa. *Was Bleibt: Erzählung*. Frankfurt am Main: Luchterhand Literaturverlag, 1990. (June-July 1979/November 1989). Print. 66.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 67.

³⁶ At one point, the author-narrator makes the link between writing and interrogation explicit by calling her writing desk a table of torture: “Schreibtisch. Foltertisch.” *Ibid.*, 71.

Gegenwart für uns und unsere Kinder eine lebbare Zukunft herauswachsen solle.”³⁷ The question is relevant diegetically—the potentially subversive question demands that the state, and the state sponsored author hold themselves accountable for both the present and the future. Christa Wolf, an author committed to the performance of herself as a dissident writer, is able to ventriloquize her own discomfort through the voice of another—that of a teacher. Furthermore, since Wolf’s story was published after reunification, the question reverberates into the post-reunification present: How can East Germans craft a livable future for themselves and their children in this new Germany?

With *Was bleibt* Christa Wolf not only wrote herself into the post-reunification literary scene, she also posed the question that continues to haunt generations of East German authors writing after reunification: *Was bleibt?* What remains? For Christa Wolf, it was imperative to salvage aspects of socialist ideology in service of the future. In her implicit engagement with Christa Wolf’s literary legacy, Jenny Erpenbeck addresses the question literally. For Erpenbeck, it is the material culture of East Germany that remains: “Immer wieder frage ich mich, was bleibt, und wohin die Dinge gehen, die einmal da waren.”³⁸ What for Wolf is self-evident becomes for Erpenbeck the ever disappearing materiality of her childhood in the German Democratic Republic. Erpenbeck works through the fragmentation and transformation of everyday objects—from socks that are lost in the dryer to Biedermeier wardrobes thrown out as trash. While both Wolf and Erpenbeck engage memory through narration, their objects of memory are located in different historical and personal contexts. For Wolf, it is the Nazi past and her coming-of-age under socialism; for Erpenbeck it is her childhood in the GDR. In contrast to Wolf,

³⁷ Ibid, 95.

³⁸ Erpenbeck, Jenny. Interview by Johannes Birgfeld. *Deutsche Bücher*. 31.3. (2005): 177-187. Print. 181.

Erpenbeck does not openly engage questions of narrating female subjectivity or feminism. Furthermore, the two differ in their literary aesthetics. While both often employ stream-of-consciousness, Erpenbeck's style of narration is simultaneously intimate and quite distanced. Erpenbeck also maintains a looser connection to autobiography than Wolf. While Erpenbeck does not engage the legacy of socialist realism through the long form of the novel, as some of her contemporaries do,³⁹ she shares with them and with Wolf an engagement with the modernism.

Part II: The Objects of Remembrance: Jenny Erpenbeck's Short Stories Alongside Contemporary Exhibitions of East German Material Culture

The temporary exhibit "Fokus DDR" at the *Deutsches Historisches Museum* (DHM) in Berlin, the *DDR Museum* in Berlin, and the *Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur der DDR* in Eisenhüttenstadt display the East German past thematically rather than chronologically. They differ in their understandings of everyday life during East German socialism, as is evidenced by their different relationships to tactile engagement with the objects; varying emphasis on education and entertainment; and explicit thematization of geo-political history irrespective of individual memory. In these exhibits and museal spaces, everyday material culture from the German Democratic Republic may be stripped of its ideological trappings, imbued with innocence, and/or aligned with *Ostalgie*. To this end, objects from East German places of work, sites that were visibly entangled with the state, as well as worker's lives are rarely depicted in post-reunification museums of everyday life.⁴⁰

³⁹ See for example *Der Turm* by Uwe Tellkamp (2008) and *Kruso* by Lutz Seiler (2014)

⁴⁰ For example see: Hübner, Peter. ">>Revolution in der Schrankwand?<< Die Objektkultur des DDR-Alltags und ihre Musealisierung in der Perspektive sozialhistorischer Forschung." *Alltag und soziales*

Similarly, Jenny Erpenbeck's short story collection *Dinge, die verschwinden* (2009) narrates everyday life through East German material culture. The objects consistently inhabit the private sphere and are often linked to subjective memory. Each of the thirty-one stories in *Dinge, die verschwinden* engages with the material and figurative meanings of tangible objects. The objects under consideration range from the *Palast der Republik* to bread and cheese crumbs to dying human bodies to the author herself, who disappears in the final story.

In the first section, I read the vignette "Palast der Republik" against the "Fokus DDR" exhibit. Erpenbeck's narrative troubles the traditional display methods of the exhibit by including subjective memory and allowing her narrators to physically manipulate memory objects. Thus, she offers a counter-memory for the objects encased in glass. In the second section, I demonstrate how Erpenbeck argues for the necessity of memory at the moment of the object's disappearance. I do this by focusing on the relationship between consumerism and consumption. Thus, I frame my analysis of the *DDR Museum* in Berlin with "Diebesgut" and "Splitterbrötchen." In the final section, I read "Tropfenfänger" alongside the *Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur der DDR* in Eisenhüttenstadt in order to demonstrate how these two different media, literature and the museum, employ similar techniques in order to re-contextualize memory objects within their historical and ideological contexts.

Gedächtnis: Die DDR-Objektkultur und ihre Musealisierung. Ed Gerd Kuhn and Andreas Ludwig Hamburg: Ergebnisse Verlag, 1997. 152-169. Print.

Memories Encased in Glass: “Fokus DDR” and Spoons from the Palast der Republik

In 2012, the *Deutsches Historisches Museum* (DHM) in Berlin staged the temporary exhibit “Fokus DDR”⁴¹ in the *Austellungshalle*. Founded in 1987, the DHM assumed the collections of its East German counterpart, the *Museum für deutsche Geschichte* (MfdG), in 1990; however, it was not until 2006 that East German history was officially added to the permanent exhibit in the *Zeughaus*. The permanent exhibit presents the dominant narrative of German division and reunification: The GDR was an oppressive state, freedom flourished in the FRG, and reunification was the successful reintegration of East Germans into German capitalist democracy. “Fokus DDR” was guided by this narrative and exhibited approximately 260 objects from the museum’s extensive collection that were not part of the permanent exhibit. Thus “Fokus DDR” served as a complement to, not critique of, the permanent exhibit. The objects on temporary display ranged from multiple busts of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Walter Ulbricht, and Wilhelm Pieck to *Freie Deutsche Jugend* paraphernalia to typical East German foodstuff to objects from the demolished *Palast der Republik*.

⁴¹ The exhibit ran from June 7, 2012 to November 25, 2012 and was curated by Carola Jüllig M.A. with Dr. Simon Kuchlbauer. The exhibit consisted of approximately 260 objects from East Germany that, due to space and curatorial decisions, are not a part of the permanent exhibit, “1949-1989: Das geteilte Deutschland.”

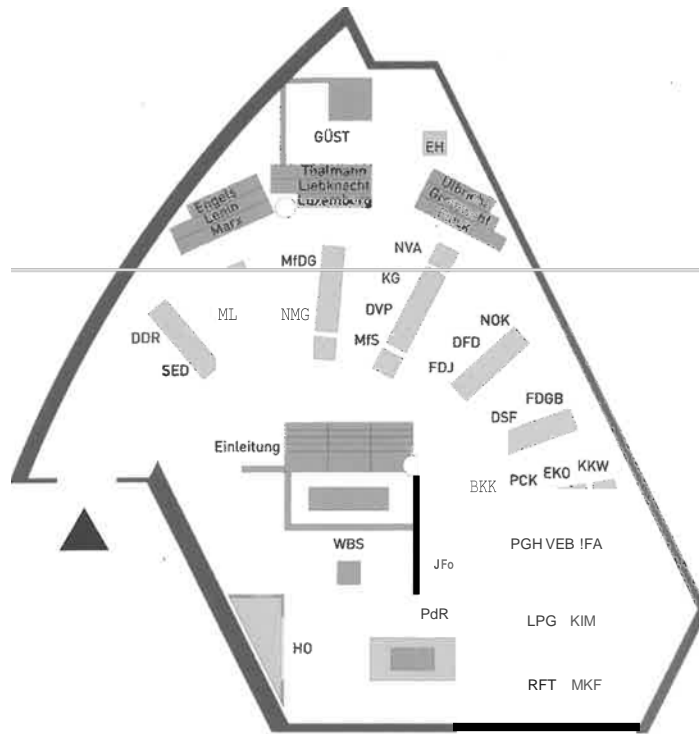


Image One: “Fokus DDR” Exhibit Plan⁴²

Visitors were guided through “Fokus DDR” not only by an optional audio tour but also by a small booklet that explained the acronyms used throughout. While the exhibit displayed both familiar aspects of GDR history, such as the SED (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*), and perhaps lesser known aspects, such as the DSF (*Gesellschaft für Deutsch-Sowjetische Freundschaft*), the booklet functioned as a glossary or keepsake for all visitors. Younger visitors were also provided with their own booklet, filled with age-appropriate information and activities. On the one hand, the accompanying material created an environment of inclusion—one did not need to have lived in the GDR or know much about it in order to appreciate the exhibit. On the other hand, the material served to locate East Germany in the past and to further mark it as an object of historical study, not as an object of individual memory.

⁴² Jüllig, Carola and Simon Kuchbauer. *Fokus DDR: Aus den Sammlungen des Deutschen Historischen Museums 7. Juni-25. November 2012: Text zur Ausstellung*. 2012. Print.

In using traditional display methods that emphasize visual engagement with the objects, “Fokus DDR” attempted to historicize the German Democratic Republic. Furthermore, the exhibit displayed many objects representing state power—ranging from busts of political thinkers valued in the GDR to paraphernalia from the *Nationale Volksarmee* (National Army) and the *Ministerium für Staatssicherheit* (Ministry for State Security). The exhibit also included everyday objects seemingly unrelated to state power. These objects were concentrated in the final three displays: PdR (*Palast der Republik*), HO (*Handelsorganisation*), and WBS (*Wohnbauserie*). Along the wall between PdR and HO displays hung a series of East German shopping bags. Visitors were given the opportunity to compare East German shopping bags not only to West German canvas bags, with which they may have been more familiar, but also the ones they themselves may have carried into the exhibit.

However, even as the exhibit presented what may be considered less ideologically charged objects, it did so through traditional display methods. Therefore, even everyday objects were employed by the exhibit to articulate the dominate narrative of East Germany as located firmly in the past and thus no longer relevant to the present. Shopping bags were mounted on the wall and encased in glass. The visitor could examine, but not feel, the difference in materials and texture between East and West Germany.

The HO section created a similar effect. Packages of East German foodstuff were set on a ledge in the foreground of the display, and a shopping cart rested in the background. The focus on each individual object, the spaces between objects, and the empty space between the front and back of the display case highlighted the scarcity of consumer goods in East Germany. While this may be a more accurate way to represent

consumerism in East Germany, it is also one that does not intend to create the space for personal memory in a historical context. In contrast, smaller, regional museums such as *Olle DDR* in Apolda, crowd their displays with material culture, leaving perhaps too much space for memory at the expense of history.



Image Two: HO Display, "Fokus DDR" Exhibit
(personal photograph by author)



Image Three: *Olle DDR* Museum⁴³

"Fokus DDR" employed these traditional display methods in order to distance the visitor from the object, maintain the visitor's visual dominance over the objects on display, maintain the integrity of the object, and discourage personal memories in favor of historical truths. However, in the PdR section, "Fokus DDR" loses some of its sharp, pedagogical edges. PdR displayed objects from the *Palast der Republik*. While the objects were encased in glass or mounted on the wall, in sight but out of reach, the section was tucked away at the end of the exhibit.

Located between HO (shopping) and *Wohnungsbauserie 70* (WBS, living), the remnants of the *Palast der Republik* are locatable in the realm of the private/domestic as

⁴³ Mammut-Live. "Apolda Olle DDR Museum Apolda/Thüringen." Still from online video clip. *You Tube*. March 11, 2011. 26 October 2015.

well as the public/ideological. As the final section before exiting, it can be experienced with relief. Finally, the visitor encounters familiar, domestic objects—cutlery sets, teacups and saucers, plates, and lamps. It is the particularity of these objects, in flux between the public and ideological realm of the historical *Palast der Republik* and the private ordinariness of domestic function, that disrupts the historical narrative that the exhibit and the museum are putting forth. This may very well have been a site for memory.



Image Four: PdR Display, “Fokus DDR” Exhibit
(Personal photograph by author)

Furthermore, this section engages temporality differently than the rest of the exhibit. While the majority of the displays in “Fokus DDR” center on institutions and objects located within the confines of the GDR, the display on material objects from the *Palast der Republik* alludes to both the past and the future. The *Palast der Republik* was built on the site of the *Berliner Stadtschloss*, which in turn was built during the 15th century and heavily bombed during WWII. In 1950, the East German government demolished the *Stadtschloss* in favor of a new building that combined the cultural and governmental imperatives of socialism, to say nothing of the aesthetics. Construction of the new *Palast der Republik* occurred between 1973 and 1976. In 1990, asbestos was discovered in the *Palast*, and despite grassroots protests, the building was (once again) demolished, this time

by the reunified German government. The city of Berlin began re-construction of the *Stadtschloss* at its original location in 2013 with the anticipated completion date of 2019.

Post-reunification Berlin and Germany are filled with such absences—empty sites where East German buildings used to stand and missing objects that are no longer being produced. This absence is already reflected in Christa Wolf’s short story, “Unter den Linden” (1969). The narrator walks along the famous East Berlin street. She encounters many familiar landmarks—the opera house, Humboldt University, the library, and the arcades. However, in both the narrated and dream sequences, two particular landmarks are absent—the Berlin Wall, which was built in 1962, and the *Palast der Republik*, not yet built. The absence of the Berlin Wall indicates a form of nostalgia, a longing for movement outside of the spatio-temporal constraints of the author-narrator’s present moment. It is also a disavowal of the border and the oppressive policies of the GDR. It is not until *Leibhaftig* (2002) that Christa Wolf explicitly thematizes the Berlin Wall.⁴⁴ In contrast to the suppressed knowledge of the Berlin Wall, for Wolf, the *Palast der Republik* is absent for historical reasons. However, the lack of reference even to the *Berliner Stadtschloss*, signifies another lacuna in Wolf’s writing of the street *Unter den Linden*.

What for Christa Wolf is an empty site, uncanny in its relationship to the suppressed Berlin Wall, becomes for Jenny Erpenbeck a historical void. Whereas in Wolf’s story time is spatialized in Erpenbeck’s writings time and memory disappear into the materiality of everyday life. Forty years after the publication of Wolf’s story about East Berlin, Jenny Erpenbeck published her own collection *Dinge, die verschwinden* (2009) on the German Democratic Republic. As the opening story, “Palast der Republik” introduces

⁴⁴ Scribner, Charity. *Requiem for Communism*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2003. Print. 135.

East German themes while also more broadly addressing the permanence of objects over time, the relationship between remembering subject and remembered object, and the role of the personal in the historical. Commenting on the collection, Julia Hell notes that, “the narrator’s gaze clings to the contours of objects as they are vanishing.”⁴⁵ Erpenbeck writes at the moment of an object’s disappearance.

Similar to the PdR section of the “Fokus DDR” exhibit, Erpenbeck’s short story highlights lamps and silverware. The three pages are fairly straight forward: A first person narrator, speaking from a temporal point after German reunification, remembers her elementary school class trip to the new *Palast der Republik*. What is not so straightforward, however, is the entanglement of narrative voice with temporal boundaries. The adult narrator is able to reflect back and note that “Ersttagesbriefe,” first-issue postage stamps which she and her classmates received shortly before their trip to the *Palast*, has the same number syllables and vowels as “Eintagsfliege,” a mayfly. In the frame narrative, the end of the *Palast* and of the German Democratic Republic is evident at the beginning. Memories of the first trip to the *Palast* resurface at the end of the narrative. At the end of the story, the narrator asks herself if her former teacher “Fräulein Kies” would now be called “Frau Kies.” Rather than as a statement on her Kies’ marital status, this seemingly innocent and childish question alludes both to societal changes since the women’s movement of the 1970s, roughly when the narrator was in elementary school, and to changes wrought by German reunification. Furthermore, this question highlights the coming-of-age aspects of the story that are evident in the narrator’s memories.

⁴⁵ Hell, Julia. “Demolition Artists: Icono-Graphy, Tanks, and Scenarios of (Post-)Communist Subjectivity in Works by Neo Rauch, Heiner Müller, Durs Grünbein, and Uwe Tellkamp.” *The Germanic Review*. 89.2 (2014): 131-170. Print. 164.

The narrator remembers a series of events that essentially comprise a coming-of-age story: her childhood, her first boyfriend, and her final visit to the *Palast*. It is specifically the silverware that is imbued with meaning in her memories. During her childhood and adolescence, the narrator would visit the café in the *Palast*. There she would use the spoons that the firm where her aunt worked had chosen, first, to stir her hot chocolate and, later, her coffee. The forks and knives accompanied her when she had dinner with her first boyfriend. When the narrator learns that the *Palast* is about to be demolished, she returns to the café and allows a spoon to disappear into her pocket: “ließ ich zur Sicherheit einen der Löffel, mit denen meine Tante das Café ausgetattet hatte, in meiner Hosentasche verschwinden.”⁴⁶ Not only is the silverware a carrier of her personal memories, it is also a part of her family history. This small act of theft is at once transgressive and an act of rescue. The spoon is a piece of material history from the German Democratic Republic that the narrator carries with her from the *Palast* into the future.

Coming-of-age stories traditionally exchange childhood for adulthood or conclude at a turning point in a character’s life that makes evident that, from that point on, the character will successfully integrate into society. In contrast, the coming-of-age narrative encountered in “Palast der Republik” revolves around loss: the loss of childhood, the loss of love, the loss of a building and by extension the loss of place. For it is the process of the *Palast*’s demolition that is the central moment of the story: “Vor drei Tagen nun konnte ich, als ich dort vorbeifuhr, schon durch den Palast hindurchsehen. Womöglich aus

⁴⁶ Erpenbeck, Jenny. “Palast der Republik.” *Dinge, die verschwinden*. Berlin: Galiani, 2009. 5-7. Print. 6. Earlier in the story, the narrator notes: “Diese Lampen hatte der Betrieb organisiert, in dem meine Tante Sigrid arbeitete.” Erpenbeck, Jenny. “Palast der Republik.” Ibid.

statischen Gründen hat man mit dem Abriß in der Mitte begonnen, so daß *die Teile, die noch aus etwas sind*, den mittleren Teil einrahmen, der im Prinzip nur noch aus Luft ist.”⁴⁷

[emphasis added] Momentarily captured through narration, the empty center, the absent referent, that is simultaneously the *Palast*, childhood, and the GDR, is made visible in its hollowness. There is no stopping the forward movement of time; there is only remembering.

Even as the material remnants of the *Palast der Republik* are demolished, Jenny Erpenbeck’s narrator carries with her a fragment stolen out of time and place. By stealing the spoon, the narrator removes it from its current function and projected obsolescence and re-signifies it as a memory object. However, the spoon already contained memory value because the narrator’s aunt was responsible for selecting cutlery for the *Palast*. Thus the personal connection to the stolen spoon adds layers of subjective memory to a public, politicized site. In her analysis of Berlin’s memory traces, Karen Till notes that “[p]eople become obsessed with material remnants because *the past* is a fiction: what remains are memories that are defined by our mourning for that which can no longer be present.”⁴⁸ Erpenbeck’s story clearly demonstrates the significance of both material remnants, specifically everyday objects, and memories in the process of mourning the past (childhood, life in the GDR) through narration.

The East Has Chosen: The Subversive, Playful, and Defiant Commercialization of the Past

The DHM 2012 exhibit “Fokus DDR” utilized traditional display methods that encouraged critical distance and visual dominance over the objects. Any aspect that evoked

⁴⁷ Erpenbeck, Jenny. “Palast der Republik.” *Dinge, die verschwinden*. Berlin: Galiani, 2009. 5-7. Print. 6-7.

⁴⁸ Till, Karen E. *The New Berlin: Memory, Politics, Place*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005. Print. 14.

personal or subjective memories was probably unintentional. In direct opposition, the *DDR Museum* in Berlin intentionally encourages visitors to remember their own experiences within the German Democratic Republic while creating new memories at the museum. Visitors with little-to-no firsthand knowledge of the GDR leave the museum with memories of the interactive displays. Furthermore, for five years consumption and consumerism were intrinsically linked because until March of 2015, visitors could literally consume the East German past in the attached restaurant that marketed itself as providing authentic GDR cuisine. The *DDR Museum* in Berlin employs a variety of display methods that range from traditional glass cases and dioramas, to interactive cabinets and media, to experiential exhibits. As part of the same museal experience, these disparate techniques encourage a physical, subjective, and tactile engagement with the East German past.⁴⁹ While potentially educational, these exhibits are fundamentally lighthearted. Even the exhibits on state oppression and the *Stasi* include interactive quizzes and on-site listening devices. In the following, I frame my reading of the *DDR Museum* in Berlin with two stories by Jenny Erpenbeck. “Diebesgut” highlights a carefree engagement with material culture at the moment of German reunification while “Splitterbrötchen” focuses more on transition and loss.

The narrator of the two page story “Diebesgut” wryly observes East German women calmly shoplift their way into reunified Germany. From her non-character bound

⁴⁹ In her reading of the museum, Anne Winkler distinguishes the *DDR Museum* in Berlin from other amateur museums of everyday life by its “professional character” which “has the effect of distancing the visitor from the subject matter.” Winkler, Anne. “Remembering and Historicizing Socialism: The Private and Amateur Musealization of East Germany’s Everyday Life.” *Exhibiting the German Past: Museums, Film, and Musealization*. Ed. Peter M. McIsaac and Gabriele Mueller. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015. 100-122. Print. 102.

perspective, the narrator describes shifting relationships to consumer goods in the immediate post-reunification period. While “Palast der Republik,” the opening story of *Dinge, die verschwinden*, is an intimate, personal, and subversive narration of East German materiality at the moment of reunification, “Diebesgut,” located in the middle of the collection, adopts a more sociological tone when recounting the East German women’s use of material culture. Another difference between the two stories is that in “Diebesgut” it is the West German consumer products that are being taken. The *Kaufhalle* is now a *Supermarkt*, and it is within this context that the women steal sunglasses; music cassettes; sweaters and fur hats; and cheese, sausage, chocolate and bottles of *Sekt*. Both stories employ similar language (*verschwinden lassen*) to describe subversive, illegitimate, and outrageously illegal engagements with material culture. The narrator in “Palast der Republik” allowed one spoon to fall into her pant pocket (*Hosentasche*); whereas, the women in “Diebesgut” allow multiple items to fall into their bags (*Taschen* and *Beutel*). The play on *Tasche* (bag/pocket) in “Diebesgut” highlights not only the historical, initial move away from East German products but also the eventual alienation from (West) German consumer goods.⁵⁰

The vignette quickly moves through discourses of East German engagement with material culture after German reunification. Initially, the West welcomed the East with open arms, and the East gladly choose Western consumer goods over Eastern ones. However, the relationship quickly turned and East Germans came to be viewed as ungrateful. Concurrently, West German consumer goods shifted in cultural value from

⁵⁰ In his work on the resurgence of East German brands after reunification, Conrad Lay tracks shifting East German attitudes toward both Western (primarily West German and US-American) consumer goods and products from the German Democratic Republic. See: Lay, Conrad. “Der Siegeszug der Ostprodukte. Zur Mentalitäts- und Produktgeschichte der deutschen Vereinigung.” *Konsum*. (January 1997): 6-10. Print.

desirable, unobtainable items to low-quality, artificial products while East German consumer goods were revalued as “authentic” and “unalienated.” The story “Diebesgut” takes up this narrative: The border opens, and West Germans “beschenken ihre armen Schwestern und Brüder.”⁵¹ However, the East German “siblings” reveal themselves to be insufficiently grateful, and demonstrate their lack of shame time and again. In their final audacious move, the women in “Diebesgut” take a lawnmower. The narrator notes: “diese ungebärdigen jungen Dinger, die fahren glatt mit dem Rasenmäher aus dem Baumarkt hinaus, am Verkäufer vorbei und nicken dem noch freundlich zu, die klauen, wenn man nicht aufpaßt, den Westen in Grund und Boden.”⁵² These East German women do not merely *Test the West*, they steal it.

In pushing *Test the West* to its limits, Erpenbeck’s story challenges the narrative that after reunification East Germans became economic and social burdens on the state. The story’s tone is a subjective and personal strategy that projects historical and critical distance. The third person non-character bound narrator assumes the position of an observer. Even though the story is marked by the year 1990, the narrative itself, in its engagement with discourses of consumption and a time before reunification, has a longer temporal frame. The ironic, sarcastic, and playful tone disrupts discourses of post-reunification consumer culture while still positing a particular mode of East German engagement with materiality that is being carried forward into the present. This disruption occurs in two directions, with respect to the reader and with respect to the East German women being observed.⁵³ On the surface, the reader is meant to commiserate with those

⁵¹ Erpenbeck, Jenny. “Diebesgut” *Dinge, die verschwinden*. Berlin: Galiani, 2009. 40-41. Print. 40.

⁵² Ibid, 41.

⁵³ Bakhtin, Mikhail. “Discourse in Life and Discourse in Art” *Fredianism: A Marxist Critique*. 1976.

who would view the East German women as ungrateful, shameless shoplifters.⁵⁴ However, the generosity of the West vis-à-vis its poor sisters and brothers in the East (*armen Schwestern und Brüder*) as well as the joy of reunification (*Wiedervereinigungsfreude*) are exaggerated. The women's perceived shamelessness is tempered by the narrator's knowledge that they are "wohlerzogen" and trained in classical music and literature. They are the ones who stood in line before sunrise "um auch nur ein Exemplar der *Ästhetik des Widerstands* von Peter Weiss zu ergattern."⁵⁵ Therefore, the narrative tone also supports the audacity of the women who, without shame, steal the West so outrageously and on their own terms.

In "Diebesgut," remembering East Germany is woven into discourses of consumption and consumerism, supporting a specific East German defiant relationship to material culture. Similarly, the *DDR Museum* in Berlin is a site for both the consumption of objects though it also understands itself to be a site for engaged learning in addition to a repository for history. The *DDR Museum* in Berlin is located near Museum Island and is unique in that it is both a public and private institution. The museum opened to the public on July 15, 2006 under the direction of Robert Rückel and with Stefan Wolle as the head of research. Since its opening, the museum has undergone two significant renovations. The first was in 2010 when the museum expanded to include both a restaurant and an exhibit room on the *Stasi* and East German state power.⁵⁶ The second was in March 2015 when

⁵⁴ The East German women shoplift "ohne dabei wenigstens rot zu werden." Erpenbeck, Jenny. "Diebesgut" *Dinge, die verschwinden*. Berlin: Galiani, 2009. 40-41. Print. 40. While the implication here is shame and embarrassment, there is also the connotation that due to their engagement with West German capitalist consumer culture, these women can no longer be true socialists.

⁵⁵ Erpenbeck, Jenny. "Diebesgut" *Dinge, die verschwinden*. Berlin: Galiani, 2009. 40-41. Print. 41.

⁵⁶ For an analysis of the DDR Museum see Arnold-de Simone, Silke. "'The Spirit of an Epoch Is Not Just Reflected in Pictures and Books, but Also in Pots and Frying Pans': GDR Museums and Memories of Everyday Life." *The GDR Remembered: Representations of the East German State Since 1989*. Ed Nick Hodgin and Caroline Pearce. Rochester, N.Y.: Camden House, 2011. 95-111. Print. and Paver, Chloe.

the restaurant closed in part so that the museum could re-focus on its stated mission: “[die] Bewahrung und die Vermittlung von Geschichte.”⁵⁷

Visitors to the *DDR Museum* are encouraged to make their own way through the exhibits and to actively engage with the objects on display. The displays are organized around twenty-seven themes ranging from public transportation, youth culture, consumption, the *Stasi*, ideology, to opposition to the state. The majority of displays and objects are hidden in drawers or behind cabinet doors. The reader opens, twists, pulls, pushes, touches, sits on, and moves through re-created East German everyday life and material culture.



Image Five: Display case, closed, *DDR Museum*



Image Six: Display case, open, *DDR Museum*⁵⁸

The emphasis on experiential learning is particularly highlighted in the two reconstructed rooms housed within the museum: the living room and the interrogation room.⁵⁹

“Colour and Time in Museums of East German Everyday Life.” *Remembering and Rethinking the GDR: Multiple Perspectives and Plural Authenticities*. Ed Anna Saunders and Debbie Pinfold. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 132-146. Print.

⁵⁷ Rückel, Robert. “Ein Abschied, der nicht leicht fällt: Das DDR Restaurant Domklaus schließt zum 31.3.2015.” *DDR Museum*. Web. 26 Oct. 2015.

⁵⁸ Image Five and Image Six: *DDR Museum*. “*DDR Museum – Berlins interaktives Museum*.” Still from online video clip. *You Tube*. March 25, 2015. 26 Oct. 2015.

⁵⁹ Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett labels these types of displays as “in-situ.” See Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998. Print.



Image Seven: Recreated living room, *DDR Museum*



Image Eight: Recreated interrogation room, *DDR Museum*⁶⁰

The living room is a reproduction from the East German planned housing estates *Wohnbauserie 70*. Visitors are encouraged to sit on the sofa and move freely within the space. They may remove objects from the shelves to examine them more closely, and they may, even if for only a moment, inhabit the space. The objects in the living room migrate from the background to the foreground with any given visitor interaction. When part of the background, they contribute to the perceived authenticity and reality of the space. When in the foreground they become props in the re-enactment of East German everyday life.

⁶⁰ Image Seven and Image Eight: *DDR Museum*. Web. 26. Oct. 2015.

Re-enactment of East German experiences occurs differently in the interrogation room, though the radical shift in environment is not necessarily acknowledged by the museum or the visitors. In contrast to the living room, the interrogation room is sparsely furnished—containing only a table, chair, lamp, and the silhouette of an interrogator. Upon entering the room, the visitor faces the lamp light and is thus invited to take a seat opposite the inanimate interrogator. Therefore, re-enactment occurs through the assumption of various subject positions in relation to the objects in the room rather than through direct interaction with any object. The lamp light hails the visitor as the object of interrogation. However, the technology in the room also allows the visitor to eavesdrop on the living room. Acoustically, the visitor assumes a position of authority akin to that of *Stasi*.

The intrusive connection between the interrogation room and the living room reveals the ways in which visitors manipulate the living room objects. Silke Arnold-de Simine accurately notes that these actions, “mimic[] the *Stasi*’s intrusion into the private sphere without being thematized as such.”⁶¹ Given that both rooms are at once familiar and strange; private and public, re-enactments in either runs the risk of conflating the two. However, it is more likely that it is the interrogation room that is attributed the presumed banal and innocuous nature of the living room. This is a radically different position from the one Christa Wolf assumes in *Was bleibt*, where the confluence of the private writing desk and the *Stasi* interrogation table evokes paranoia and suppression. Furthermore, in highlighting the playful nature of the objects on display, the *DDR Museum* in Berlin, perhaps unintentionally, erases the socialist ideology with which they were imbued. In her

⁶¹ Arnold-de Simine, Silke. “‘The Spirit of an Epoch Is Not Just Reflected in Pictures and Books, but Also in Pots and Frying Pans’: GDR Museums and Memories of Everyday Life.” *The GDR Remembered: Representations of the East German State Since 1989*. Ed Nick Hodgkin and Caroline Pearce. Rochester, N.Y.: Camden House, 2011. 95-111. Print. 105.

stories, Jenny Erpenbeck works through the playful, fragile, and dangerous aspects of everyday objects.

In her short story “Splitterbrötchen,” Erpenbeck highlights discourses of East German consumerism post-reunification. Similar to “Diebesgut,” the story “Splitterbrötchen” adopts a defiant and subversive tone in reference to material culture. However, the narrative voice in “Splitterbrötchen” is underscored by a melancholic tone not found in the satirical “Diebesgut.” Similar to the *DDR Museum* in Berlin, “Splitterbrötchen” addresses consumption alongside consumerism; however, Erpenbeck’s story engages the superficiality (in content and construction) of West German consumer goods in contrast to the remembered quality and “authenticity” of East German goods. “Splitterbrötchen” addresses an East German alienation from West German consumer goods and employs the weight of personal experience and memory to counter discourses of consumption that 1) seek to erase East German consumer goods from collective or institutional memory, even as the goods themselves are morphing and disappearing, and 2) attempt to surreptitiously replace those goods with their West German counterparts without acknowledging the material, let alone the symbolic, differences in the products.

“Splitterbrötchen” is a three part, three page story. The first and third parts contemplate the presence and absence of *Splitterbrötchen*, a type of East German roll, and frame the second part, which is a staged dialogue between the narrator and an imagined baker. The baker also functions as a representative of the baker’s guild and is not a character in the narrative, but rather a voice (presented in italics) that the narrator adopts. The explicit reference to “Die Geschichte vom fliegenden Robert” locates Erpenbeck’s

story within a German literary tradition beyond the temporal borders of the German Democratic Republic and adds a playful and subversive undertone to her narrative.

In the nursery rhyme “Die Geschichte vom fliegenden Robert” from Heinrich Hoffmann’s collection of German cautionary tales for children *Struwwelpeter*, Robert chooses to ignore stormy conditions and is swept away. The final line reads, “Wo der Wind sie hingetragen—Ja, das weiß kein Mensch zu sagen.”⁶² Erpenbeck adopts and adapts it for “Splitterbrötchen”: “Wo der Wind *es* hingetragen—Ja, das weiß kein Mensch zu sagen...”⁶³ [emphasis added, ellipsis in original]. Erpenbeck has altered the line in two significant ways. The first noticeable difference is the change in pronoun from “sie” to “es.” The change is a tongue-in-cheek way of writing a particular East German object (the roll) into a traditional German rhyme. Secondly, both the rhyme and Erpenbeck’s story conclude with an ellipsis. These refer back to the narrator’s dialogue with the baker. The two voices constantly interrupt each other, indicating that the discussion is ongoing. What remains of East Germany, “das weiß kein Mensch zu sagen...”⁶⁴

The use of the present tense throughout the story further indicates that the question of how East Germany is being remembered is still under discussion. This is particularly salient in the staged dialogue between the narrator and the baker. The narrator insists that the *Splitterbrötchen* as she remembers it still exist. She describes the bread roll that she remembers:

Ein dichter, fast zäher Kuchenbrötchenteig ohne Rosinen, die Form weder rund noch eckig, sondern zusammengestückelt, so als habe der Bäcker alle Teigstücke, die übrig waren, aneinandergeklebt und daraus irgend etwas Unebenes gebacken.⁶⁵

⁶² Erpenbeck, Jenny. “Splitterbrötchen.” *Dinge, die verschwinden*. Berlin: Galiani, 2009. 79-81. Print. 81. Here “sie” is the plural referring to Robert and his umbrella.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 79.

The description draws attention to the materiality of the object. It simultaneously refers to actual baked goods from her past, to an imagined ideal baked good, and to the meaning that is lost in the bread's transformation from an East to West German consumer product. According to the narrator, a *Splitterbrötchen* should be made to look as if the baker cobbled together all remaining dough pieces into a bread like item that ultimately is a little rough looking. The bread and one of the things it stands for, namely a certain pride East Germans have of having been able to cobble together a type of life making use of whatever was available to them given the shortages and restrictions under socialism, serve as a form of counter-memory.

According to the post-reunification baker, the type of bread that the narrator describes never existed: narrator: "Grundsätzlich ist das Splitterbrötchen von heute ein anderes als vor zwanzig Jahren. [baker:] *Er war nie anders: Ziehteig wird genommen, Fett eintouriert, Touren—...*"⁶⁶ The baker only understands the roll in its (West) German incarnation. The present tense also exposes the uneven level at which the dialogue is taking place—the narrator wants to remember what a *Splitterbrötchen* was while the baker insists that the present iteration of the bread is representative of its past and future. The baker stands in for a revised archival memory that attempts to safeguard a version of the past that coincides nicely with the imagined present and projected future. According to the narrator, he is the one who guards the door "so daß mein Splitterbrötchen nie mehr zurückkann."⁶⁷ As long as the baker stands guard, the bread that she remembers cannot return, and the two

⁶⁶ Ibid, 80.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 81.

remaining bakeries that sell East German *Splitterbrötchen* are in danger of disappearing. However, as long as the narrator remembers, she can offer a counter-memory.

Because the narrator and the baker cannot agree on what the *Splitterbrötchen* was, is, and/or should be, the various coexisting “authentic” moments of the roll’s life destabilize notions of authenticity. This destabilization also engages with recent fictional narratives on the disappearance of homemade bread in the face of the industrial production of dough, which is made off-site, frozen, and then distributed widely to bakeries across Germany.

For example, when the autobiographical narrator in Nicola Nürnberger’s novel *Westschrippe* (2013) recalls her childhood in a small town just outside of Frankfurt am Main, she also affectionately recalls the rolls from her childhood: “Die Brötchen sind groß und ganz hell, haben ohne einen Längsschlitz, sind nur ein bisschen knusprig und innen beißt man wie auf Samt. Man kann sie auch ein paar Tage aufheben, dann sind sie immer noch lecker. Und sie schmecken mit allem...”⁶⁸ In a manner similar to Erpenbeck’s narrator, Nürnberger’s recalls a more substantial bread than what is currently offered in bakeries. On the one hand, the memory is tinged with childhood nostalgia. On the other hand, it articulates a critique of decreased quality under mass production.

In another contemporary example, the narrator in Bendikt Sarreiter’s short piece “Bäcker” (2007) recalls that bread would taste differently in each village: “Früher schmeckte sie mal von Dorf zu Dorf verschieden, heute schmeckt sie überall gleich. Industrie-Backwaren ebnen regionale Unterschiede ein, Maschinen kneten und formen

⁶⁸ Nürnberger, Nicola. *Westschrippe*. Leipzig: Open House Verlag, 2013. Print. 8.

effizienter, Bäckereien werden Handyläden....”⁶⁹ Sarreiter is concerned with the negative effects that industrial mass production has on village life; whereas, the narrator in Erpenbeck’s story highlights shifts within regional production in relation to changes in geopolitics and the passage of time. Even though “Splitterbrötchen” is about a specific form of East German bread, Erpenbeck’s narrative contributes to wider-reaching complaints against the mass production of consumer goods and a longing for “traditional” methods within a community. This melancholic and nostalgic undertone challenges a purely commercial relationship with the bread.

“Splitterbrötchen” is a story about how East Germany is being remembered and it is also about disappearance:

Zum erstenmal fällt mir auf, daß das Wort ‘verschwinden’ einen aktiven Kern hat, daß ein Täter in dem Wort steckt, der Dinge, die ich kenne und schätze, zum Verschwinden bringt: Vernichten, verwüsten, vermauern, verfluchen, veruntreuen, verjagen, verderben. Und der, der all das auf dem Gewissen hat, der hat auch mein Splitterbrötchen zum Verschwinden gebracht, der hat es verschunden, der hat das, was ich gut kannte und gern gegessen habe, aus allen Bäckereien ausgesperrt (nur aus zweien in Berlin-Mitte noch nicht), hat es hinausgetrieben und wartet jetzt, bis meine Erinnerung daran, wie ein Splitterbrötchen eigentlich schmecken und aussehen muß, VERblaßt und VERflogen ist.⁷⁰

Contemplating the specific disappearance of the *Splitterbrötchen* creates the space to discuss disappearance more broadly. Erpenbeck halts the description of the roll and the narration of the story in order to contemplate language. The word *verschwinden*—to disappear—has an active kernel and a directed center of agency. What is telling here is that agent is presented as a perpetrator (*Täter*). Allusions to the Third Reich in this contemplation cannot be ignored: *Täter, vernichten, verfluchen, verjagen*. These words

⁶⁹ Sarreiter, Benedikt. “Bäcker.” “Liftboy, *der* Ein Alphabet des Verschwindens.” *Du*. 782. (Dec. 2007): 20. Print. 20.

⁷⁰ Erpenbeck, Jenny. “Splitterbrötchen.” *Dinge, die verschwinden*. Berlin: Galiani, 2009. 79-81. Print. Ellipses in the original

have historical significance and are not innocent; however, the connection between the Third Reich and the disappearance of the *Splitterbrötchen* is not fully explored in Erpenbeck's story. *Veruntreuen* and *verderben* hold within themselves a critique of capitalist markets embroiled in planned obsolescence.⁷¹ The paragraph quickly enters the realm of children's rhymes: *verblaßt* and *verflogen*. These verbs refer to "Die Geschichte vom fliegenden Robert." By the end of the story, it appears as if the *Splitterbrötchen* has disappeared, but that too remains to be seen.

Jenny Erpenbeck's stories reveal that East German material culture at the nexus of consumerism and consumption is also the site of personal memory. The women in "Diebesgut" steal the West as they move away from the past; yet, they carry their East German defiance vis-a-vis material culture with them into the future. The narrator in "Splitterbrötchen" insists on her memories and uses them as evidence of an East German bread roll. She does not allow for its existence and disappearance to go unremarked. Erpenbeck's short stories are sites where memory holds disappearance at bay, even if only temporarily.

⁷¹ Pointing out the heavily ironic and kitsch appropriations of East German products reentering consumer circulation, Jonathan Bach also addresses the role that West German owners, agents and corporations play in this economic regeneration of East German products. Furthermore, Bach identifies *Ostalgie* as a longing for a utopian future. See: Bach, Jonathan. "'The Taste Remains': Consumption, (N)ostalgia, and the Production of East Germany." *Public Culture*. 14.3 (Fall 2002): 545-556. Print. In his reading of the film *Goodbye, Lenin!* (2004) Bach discusses how *Ostalgie* manifests itself as cultural rather than political identifications with East Germany. See Bach, Jonathan. "Vanishing Acts and Virtual Reconstructions: Technologies of Memory and the Afterlife of the GDR." *Memory Traces: 1989 and the Question of German Cultural Identity*. Ed Silke Arnold-de Simine. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2005. 261-280. Print. Also see Berdahl, Daphne. "'(N)Ostalgie' for the Present: Memory, Longing, and East German Things." *Ethnos*. 64.2 (1999): 192-211. Print. and Lay, Conrad. "Der Siegeszug der Ostprodukte. Zur Mentalitäts- und Produktgeschichte der deutschen Vereinigung." *Konsum*. (January 1997): 6-10. Print.

Taxonomy of Memory: Everyday Objects Re-contextualized through Museal and Textual Exhibition

In the following section, I examine the objects displayed in the 2011 “aufgehobene Dinge” exhibit at the *Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur der DDR* (hereafter Documentation Center) in Eisenhüttenstadt alongside the rug stands, stockings, and drip-catchers encountered in Jenny Erpenbeck’s short story “Tropfenfänger.” Even when these objects reside entirely within the domestic sphere, their museal and narrative re-contextualization reveal the ways in which personal objects are imbued with memory, ideology and historical significance.

The Documentation Center in Eisenhüttenstadt does not envision itself to be a traditional museum of everyday East German material culture.⁷² Rather, it functions as a documentation center, where personal memory intersects with historical strands. As such, its display methods are located between those of the DHM 2012 temporary exhibit “Fokus DDR” and the *DDR Museum* in Berlin. Similar to “Fokus DDR,” the Documentation Center documents the history of the German Democratic Republic; however, it does so by also explicitly relying on the personal memories of contributors and visitors. The Center houses at least 2,000 accompanying stories to the objects in its collection. Furthermore, visitors are encouraged to activate their own knowledge and memories when viewing the objects on display. The Documentation Center employs traditional display methods such as

⁷² The Documentation Center was founded in 1993 under the conception and direction of Andreas Ludwig. Ludwig remained director until 2012, when management of the Documentation Center went to the city. In 2013, Ludwig moved to the *Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung* in Potsdam, where he is working on a memory based project using the Documentation Center’s collection. As of October 2014, Hartmut Preuß served as director of the Documentation Center, engaging with the new directive focusing on educating school groups. As of October 2014, the Documentation Center had seen approximately 4,000 visitors for that year. Though the future of the collection and site remains unspecified, the Documentation Center has hosted temporary photography exhibitions, most recently, “Freizeit, Kunst, & Lebensfreude” from November 7, 2015 to January 3, 2016.

glass cases in order to safeguard (*bewahren*) the objects. However, here memories are also safeguarded by the institution. Subjective, individual memory is actively encouraged throughout the site. Similar to the *DDR Museum* in Berlin, the Documentation Center includes re-constructed East German spaces; however, these spaces have a specific link to the site. The traditional daycare center on display, including a line of joined toilet seats, draws on the history of the Documentation Center's building, which was previously a daycare center and kindergarten in the city of Eisenhüttenstadt.



Image Nine: Exterior, *Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur der DDR*⁷³

The permanent exhibit also engages with the building's and the city's history.⁷⁴ In further contrast to the *DDR Museum*, the Documentation Center consistently addressed East German state interventions into everyday life as part of its exhibition practices.

A selection of the Documentation Center's 700,000 objects are on permanent exhibition throughout ten rooms. The displays are arranged thematically around everyday life, socialist ways of life, politics, society, education, state oppression, and resistance to socialism. Evident in the Center's mode of display is an attention to collecting, materiality, documentation, history, and memory different from that which is encountered in other

⁷³ Ludwig, Andreas. *Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur der DDR*. Web. 2010. 26 Oct. 2015.

⁷⁴ Eisenhüttenstadt was known as Stalinstadt during the GDR. The city was rebuilt according to socialist architectural and urban planning ideals in the early 1950s. Stalinstadt and the surrounding area housed the largest metal works mills in the GDR.

museal spaces of East Germany. The Documentation Center is invested in safeguarding the relationship between public memory and the process of collecting, and thus plays a unique role in contemporary memory contests. Andreas Ludwig, founder and former director, articulates the center's mission under three points: 1) material culture from East German everyday life needs to be preserved, 2) this material culture can only be accessed through eye-witnesses and their stories, and 3) the exhibitions serve a communicative forum for public and interpersonal debates about history.⁷⁵ The mission was integrated into the permanent and temporary exhibits.

In 2011, the temporary exhibit "Aufgehobene Dinge. Ein Frauenleben in Ost-Berlin" was on display at the Documentation Center.⁷⁶ After Ilse Polzin's death in 2004, the Center inherited approximately 4,800 objects from her estate. Over the course of her life, Frau P, as she is referred to throughout the exhibit, collected and categorized objects that largely fit into three categories: writing, decorations for women, and decorations for the home.⁷⁷ The movement of the objects from Frau P's apartment to the Documentation Center, from cabinets in an apartment to cabinets on display, re-signified the objects from personal and functional to public and historical. In many ways, Frau P's life was exemplary. Born in 1919 during the Weimar years, she received her education under National Socialism. The majority of her life was spent in the German Democratic Republic, though her sister lived in the Federal Republic of Germany (hence the presence

⁷⁵ Ludwig, Andreas. "Representations of Everyday and the Making of Memory: GDR History and Museums." *Remembering the German Democratic Republic: Divided Memory in a United Germany*. Ed David Clare, and Ute Wölfel. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 37-53. Print. 49.

⁷⁶ "Aufgehobene Dinge. Ein Frauenleben in Ost-Berlin" was exhibited in the *Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur der DDR* in Eisenhüttenstadt from March 28, 2010 to May 1, 2011. It then traveled to the *Museum und Galerie Falkensee*, in Falkensee and was on display there from June 10 to October 2, 2011.

⁷⁷ Ludwig, Andreas and Karl-Robert Schütze. *aufgehobene Dinge*. Berlin: Verlag Karl-Robert Schütze, 2011. Print. 6.

of West German products in her collection). Frau P lived her final years in reunified Germany. In many ways, Frau P's life was also representative of a German middle-class life. She had no extreme political opinions, had a small circle of friends, was able to consistently work throughout her adult life, and she would regularly vacation.

Frau P's accumulation of everyday objects created an opportunity for the curators of the temporary exhibit, Andreas Ludwig and Karl-Robert Schütze, to explore the nature of collecting at the private (individual) and the public (institutional) levels. The exhibition's organization pivoted on the expectation that personal objects express identity and familiarity.⁷⁸ However, while both decorative and functional, most of the objects in Frau P's apartment had never been used. Some were still in their original packaging. Even though Frau P was relatively social, few people were invited into her apartment or gained access to her collection. Therefore, Ludwig and Schütze ask: "Räumlich gehörten sie zu ihr, aber ließ sie die Dinge, wie auch die Menschen, wirklich an sich heran?"⁷⁹ In their question, objects and humans are afforded a parallel relationship to Frau P. Even though the objects belonged to her and shared space with her, what effect did they actually have on her subjective life? Similarly, to what extent were people a part of her life?

Even though the question itself is unanswerable, the exhibition further asks: What does it mean to exhibit personal objects from a woman's life and apartment? On the one hand, the sheer banality of the objects, particularly those linked to femininity and domesticity, when viewed in conjunction with the relatively apolitical life that Frau P led, allowed daily life in the German Democratic Republic to be represented through its

⁷⁸ Ibid, 5.

⁷⁹ Ludwig, Andreas and Karl-Robert Schütze. *aufgehobene Dinge*. Berlin: Verlag Karl-Robert Schütze, 2011. Print. 7.

material culture as benign and approachable. No doubt the curators imagined multiple points of commonality among Frau P's life, her collection, the center's exhibition, and the lives of the exhibit's visitors. On the other hand, within the context of the Documentation Center, domestic objects, particularly those stored and collected in an East German apartment cannot be separated from their historical or ideological pasts. The temporary exhibition acknowledges and preserves the absent referent (Frau P, her apartment, East Germany) in a delicate balance with the past and the present, the afterlife of objects and the subjective memories of (future) visitors. The Documentation Center in Eisenhüttenstadt collects and exhibits everyday material culture by contextualizing it with narration, ideology, and history.

Similarly, in her short story "Tropfenfänger" from *Dinge, die verschwinden*, Jenny Erpenbeck creates a series of narrative tableaux with everyday domestic objects. "Tropfenfänger" is a three page story divided into three distinct yet intertwined segments. The first segment is only a paragraph long and narrates the disappearance of rug stands; the second, also only a paragraph, presents the disappearance of East German women's stockings; and the third segment, a three-part engagement with the multiple disappearances of the titular drip-catcher, occupies the remaining pages of the story. Though hardly described, the objects encountered throughout the narrative are staged in relationship to one another. Individual objects only come into focus through their interdependence with other objects. However, as technology advances or customs change, some objects are made obsolete and are summarily replaced. For example, the rug stand is replaced by the vacuum cleaner. While the objects are often presented in accordance to their function and (waning) usefulness, human characters and agents are largely absent in the story, especially in the

first segment. In displaying both memory and history, these tableaux segments ultimately reveal the inherent violence of domesticity, which in itself is an allusion to German modernists such as Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer.

The first segment of “Tropfenfänger” describes the disappearance of the frames used to clean rugs: “Die Teppichstangen verschwanden aus den Hinterhöfen, als die Auslegeware und der Staubsauger erfunden wurden. Als die Perserteppiche weggebombt, das Geld für die Neuanschaffung nicht vorhanden war und die Männer, die sonst die zusammengerollten Teppiche nach unten getragen hatten, im Krieg gefallen waren.”⁸⁰

These frames disappeared when carpets and vacuum cleaners were invented; the invention thereof is specifically contextualized by the allied bombing of German cities during World War II. According to the logic of the segment, the expensive rugs were destroyed and could not be replaced due to economic constraints and changes in demographics after the war. Therefore, there was no longer a need for rug frames.

The disappearance of the rug frames is narrated in the passive voice. This simultaneously obscures and universalizes the agentic forces that contributed to their disappearance vis-à-vis the World War II. The objects—the rugs, the frames, the carpets, and the vacuum cleaners—are not described, yet it is this precise constellation that reveals the historical movement of time. The segment implicitly grants agency to time as that which advances technology and shapes human social interactions with the objects they produce. It is not only through technology that time moves but also through history, economics, and gender. Human agents are thus universalized (the men who died in the war) and obscured (the women and servants who presumably cleaned the rugs and who

⁸⁰ Erpenbeck, Jenny. “Tropfenfänger.” *Dinge, die verschwinden*. Berlin: Galiani, 2009. 63-65. Print. 63.

now use the vacuum cleaners). Furthermore, because Erpenbeck wrote this in the passive voice, it becomes evident that the reader is not being asked to evaluate the context of the war or shifts in gender norms, but rather to observe the disappearance of objects within their narrated historical, economic, and gendered contexts.

In the second segment, East German women's stockings have disappeared, and they are remembered through their historical, economic, and gendered contexts. In this segment, the narrator is perceptible for the first and only time: "Die Einrichtung, in die ich als junges Mädchen meine kaputten Feinstrumpfhosen brachten, genannt >Laufmaschenexpresß<, verschwand, als die Mauer fiel und der Westen seine billigen Feinstrümpfe auch im Osten anbieten konnte."⁸¹ In this one sentence segment, the narrator remembers the shop where she used to take her stockings to be repaired. However, since German reunification, cheap Western panty hose have become commonplace even in the former East. Therefore, the "Laufmaschenexpresß[e]" she remembers from her youth have disappeared, taking with them East German stockings. Her memories of the past are thus inextricably linked to both historical events and the present. The narrator remembers herself as a young girl, and thus the story briefly highlights gender. Though the objects and places that she remembers are coded as feminine. The economic discourse is located in the disappearance of the East German repair store and what is presented as a particularly East German relationship to consumer materiality—that of repair rather than replacement. This sentiment is also present in the final sentence of the story: "Sie soll'n nich stopfen, sie soll'n kaufen!"⁸² This slogan echoes the language of advertising, yet it also addresses the reader, perhaps as complicit in the post-reunification culture of consumption.

⁸¹ Erpenbeck, Jenny. "Tropfenfänger." *Dinge, die verschwinden*. Berlin: Galiani, 2009. 63-65. Print. 63.

⁸² Ibid, 65.

In remembering East German women's stockings, the narrative integrates East German loss not only into a history of divided and reunified Germany but also into discussions of loss more broadly. The third segment of the story focuses on drip-catchers and deepens the narrative's engagement with remembering and loss. This segment is further divided into three parts, each a paragraph long, which detail the disappearances of these tiny defenders of domesticity. The first part presents a tableau comprised of a drip-catcher, a coffee pot, and a serving tray. This first part also narrates the drip-catcher's initial disappearance in West Germany. The second part situates the object in a larger literary and historical contemplation on the violence inherent in domesticity. The third part addresses the second disappearance of the drip-catcher after German reunification.

The tableau of drip-catcher, coffee pot, and serving tray is briefly presented, apparently only to narrate the initial disappearance of the drip-catcher. The tableau also functions as the stage for the narrator's broad musings on the disappearance of objects. This contemplation comprises the second part of the segment on drip-catchers. The narrator describes the drip-catcher as "ein rundes Schaumstoffröllchen an einem Gummi, der auf Höhe des Deckels mit Schmetterling, Puppe oder Perle verziert ist..."⁸³ Description is rare in Jenny Erpenbeck's work and here pushes the materiality of the object against its various meanings. For a brief moment the object itself becomes visible within its surrounding discourses. Also evident in the description is the way in which the object is being presented simultaneously as specific and universal. While all drip-catchers are made of foam and rubber, they could have been individualized with a butterfly, doll, or pearl.

⁸³ Ibid, 64.

Though brief, the description itself follows an attribution of agency to the objects from the tableau presented in the first part. The thin coffee that Germans consumed in the immediate postwar years wants to spill out of the coffee pot (*herabrinnen wollend im Zaum gehalten*). It is only the tiny defender of domesticity, the drip-catcher, that can protect the tablecloths (*weiße Tischdecken*) from stains. The drip-catcher stands in opposition to the coffee and the coffee's unruly desire. Despite their potential for agency—the coffee *wants* to spill over, the drip catcher *protects*—objects are closely tied to their use value and disappear when their context disappears: “Die Dinge verschwinden, wenn ihnen die Existenzgrundlage entzogen wird, so als hätten auch sie einen Hunger, der gestillt werden muß.”⁸⁴ According to the story, objects continue to exist as memories and signs, endlessly referring to the materiality that once was as well as the attending thoughts, ideologies, and feelings.

To date, scholarly engagement with the world of objects in Jenny Erpenbeck's oeuvre has focused on either the relationship between language and materiality (as presented in *Wörterbuch*) or the domestic objects from the house in *Heimsuchung*.⁸⁵ Furthermore, in her brief reading of “Tropfenfänger,” Gillian Pye understands the objects in the story to be interdependent with their human subjects and that these relationships ultimately reveal the fragility and vulnerability of human existence in a series of ‘now’ moments.⁸⁶ For Pye, the emphasis is on how the human subjects in the story experience the

⁸⁴ Ibid, 64.

⁸⁵ See: Schöll, Julia. “Wörter und Dinge. Jenny Erpenbecks Text- und Objektästhetik.” *Wahrheit und Täuschung: Beiträge zum Werk Jenny Erpenbecks*. Ed. Friedhalm Marx and Julia Schöll. Göttingen: Wallstein, 2014. 37-53. Print., Chronister, Necia. “Narrating the Fault Lines: German Literature since the Fall of the Wall.” *World Literature Today*. November 2014. Web. 3. March 2015., and Pye, Gillian. “Jenny Erpenbeck and the Life of Things.” *Emerging Women Writers in German-language Literature*. Ed. Valerie Heffernan and Gillian Pye. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013. 111-130. Print.

⁸⁶ Gillian Pye briefly touches on material culture in *Dinge, die verschwinden* in Pye, Gillian. “Jenny Erpenbeck and the Life of Things.” *Emerging Women Writers in German-language Literature*. Ed. Valerie

present. However, human agents are largely absent from the story. Furthermore, the East German narrator, not perceptible in this segment, is herself an object in danger of disappearing. She too is an object of history, an object of memory.

In contemplating the disappearance of objects, particularly in reference to consumption and consumerism, the narrative adopts a playful and defiant tone reminiscent of “Diebesgut.” However, “Tropfenfänger” further deploys defiance and satire in order to uncover the violence hidden by white German tablecloths:

Und auch wenn der Grund für ihr Verschwinden unendlich weit entfernt von den Dingen selbst ist, *so weit entfernt wie beispielsweise die Verbrechen der deutschen Wehrmacht vom viel zu dünnen, deutschen Kaffee*, kredenzt in bauchigen Kannen, herabrinnen wollend im Zaum gehalten durch die Auffangvorrichtung, ein rundes Schaumstoffröllchen an einem Gummi, der auf Höhe des Deckels mit Schmetterling, Puppe oder Perle verziert ist, durch das kleine Ding, das bis in die Mitte der siebziger Jahre des letzten Jahrhunderts weiße Tischdecken in Deutschland davor bewahrte, befleckt zu werden, selbst dann knüpft das Verschwinden—egal, wie weit die Sitte, die Erfindung, die Revolution, die zu seinem Verschwinden führt, von dem Ding selbst entfernt ist—ein Band, wie es nicht enger sein könnte. Der Berliner Maler Heinrich Zille hat zum Beispiel einmal gesagt, mit einer Wohnung könne man einen Menschen genauso erschlagen wie mit einer Axt.⁸⁷ [Emphasis added.]

The narrative contemplation of disappearance references two specific contexts of violence, one historical and one aesthetic: 1) the German *Wehrmacht*, which in and of itself functions as a cipher for Nazi violence during the Third Reich and 2) modernist engagements with domesticity.

The first disappearance of the drip-catcher only occurs after Germany’s defeat in WWII and after the children born during the war have rebelled against the traditions of

Heffernan and Gillian Pye. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013. 111-130. Print as does Julia Hell in her article on Durs Grünbein and Uwe Tellkamp: Hell, Julia. “Demolition Artists: Icono-Graphy, Tanks, and Scenarios of (Post-)Communist Subjectivity in Works by Neo Rauch, Heiner Müller, Durs Grünbein, and Uwe Tellkamp.” *The Germanic Review*. 89.2 (2014): 131-170. Print.

⁸⁷ Erpenbeck, Jenny. “Tropfenfänger.” *Dinge, die verschwinden*. Berlin: Galiani, 2009. 63-65. Print. 64.

their parents. The contextual connection between drip-catchers and the crimes of the *Wehrmacht* is narrated in a similarly distanced tone as the disappearance of the rug frames after the war. At the beginning of “Tropfenfänger” the focus is (implicitly) on German victims—those affected by the Allied bombing of German cities and the men who did not return from the war; however, by the end of the narrative, the focus is on the perpetrators—those who committed crimes during the war. Within the three-page span of the narrative, Jenny Erpenbeck contextualizes the disappearance of rug-frames and drip-catchers within multiple perspectives of 20th century German history. Therefore, the disappearance of these domestic objects, while written through the voice of loss and mourning, cannot be perceived as a melancholic loss.

Furthermore, Jenny Erpenbeck also reads the disappearance of the drip-catcher within the tradition of German modernism. The second part on drip-catchers concludes with a direct, unmarked quote from Heinrich Zille: “Der Berliner Maler Heinrich Zille hat zum Beispiel einmal gesagt, mit einer Wohnung könne man einen Menschen genauso erschlagen wie mit einer Axt.”⁸⁸ The direct reference to Heinrich Zille, a known proletarian anti-bourgeois artist, as well as the specific content of Zille’s quote situates Jenny Erpenbeck’s work within a modernist tradition of challenging and destabilizing notions of the domestic sphere as a safe bourgeois interior. Erpenbeck’s engagement with the darker side of domesticity recalls Walter Benjamin’s “Hochherrschaftlich möblierte Zehnzimmerwohnung.”⁸⁹ Both Erpenbeck and Benjamin comment on the suffocating nature of domestic objects, and both embed their understandings of the past and present

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Benjamin, Walter. “Hochherrschaftlich möblierte Zehnzimmerwohnung.” *Einbahnstrasse*. Berlin: Ernst Rowohlt Verlag, 1928. 11-12. Print.

within larger literary-aesthetic traditions. In the gothic tradition of Edgar Allen Poe, Walter Benjamin can almost see the murdered bodies strewn among the early 19th century furniture that is central to his contemplation of the furnished apartment.

In his miniatures, “Falscher Untergang der Regenschirme,” “Die soziale Lage der Tintenfässer,” and “Die Hosenträger,” Siegfried Kracauer engages with the use-value and social value of everyday objects. His humorous stories focus on the status value of the objects in relation to the human subjects, and it is these subject-object relationships that are central to his presentation of everyday objects at the moment of their (potential) disappearance. Similar to the rug-stands in “Tropfenfänger,” the inkpot in “Die soziale Lage der Tintenfässer” is made obsolete by the appearance of more advanced technology, specifically the typewriter.⁹⁰ The suspenders in “Die Hosenträger” are replaced by belts, a shift in fashion and custom that is linked to the deterioration of the modern man.⁹¹ While both Kracauer and Erpenbeck are invested in the social lives of objects, Erpenbeck focuses less on the subject-object relationship and more on contextualizing individual objects either through personal stories (e.g. “Palast der Republik”), historical turning points (e.g. “Diebesgut” and “Splitterbrötchen”), or embedded histories (e.g. “Tropfenfänger”).

While Erpenbeck’s narratives, especially her short prose, allude to a modernist tradition, ultimately they are written from a distinctly East German perspective that is fundamentally embedded in a German literary and cultural tradition. Erpenbeck’s authorial gaze lightly and temporarily rests on the disappearing objects of her world. Her narratives

⁹⁰ Kracauer, Siegfried. “Die soziale Lage der Tintenfässer.” *Essays, Feuilletons, Rezensionen: Band 5.2: 1924-1927*. Ed Inka Mülder-Bach. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011. 445-449. Print.

⁹¹ Kracauer, Siegfried. “Die Hosenträger.” *Essays, Feuilletons, Rezensionen: Band 5.2: 1924-1927*. Ed Inka Mülder-Bach. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011. 482-485. Print.

are at once distant, playful, defiant, satirical, anti-capitalist, and also embedded in discourses of consumerism and consumption. Christa Wolf's story *Was bleibt* is an important interlocutor for Erpenbeck's disappearing objects. For Wolf, the objects in the apartment are understood as East German, but their historical and memorial significance is not yet evident. Amidst the rapidly changing geographical, political, and material cultures of post-reunification Germany, Jenny Erpenbeck writes in response to Christa Wolf—briefly, thematically, and tangentially. Furthermore, she is writing in conversation with contemporary displays of East German material culture. Erpenbeck's narratives demonstrate: These objects, these memories of mine, they remain. This is the materiality of memory.

Chapter Two

The Landscape of Memory in Judith Schalansky's Novels

Judith Schalansky is uniquely situated in the contemporary German literary field as author, designer, and book editor.⁹² Her debut novel, *Blau steht dir nicht* (2008), is partially set in the German Democratic Republic, and her second novel, *Der Hals der Giraffe* (2011), is set in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. Both remember the GDR through subjective memory, complex narrative aesthetics, and visual culture. *Blau steht dir nicht* is about Jenny's childhood in the GDR, her coming-of-age after 1989, and her post-reunification mobility. The narrative alternates between the past and the present. On the one hand, the novel presents memory as autobiographical and subjective by limiting childhood memories to the time Jenny spent on the island Usedom with her grandparents. On the other hand, the novel presents memory as generational, historical, and cyclical by including aspects of the grandparents' biographies, Soviet and global history, and natural phenomena. These layers of memory are further underscored by Schalansky's use of multi-

⁹² Judith Schalansky was born in 1980 just north of East Berlin in Greifswald. She was nine years old at the time of German reunification. She studied Art History at the Free University in Berlin and taught typography in Potsdam before moving to reunified Berlin. In 2006 she published the compendium *Fraktur mon Amour*. In 2009, wrote the opera *Mandy's Baby*. In 2012 Florian Fiedler directed the stage adaptation of *Der Hals der Giraffe*. Judith Schalansky is currently designing and editing the *Naturkunden* series with the publishing house Matthes & Seitz.

medial narrative aesthetics ranging from a shift in narrative perspective to the inclusion of photographs. The photographs are intimately linked to the narration.

Similarly, the lithograph prints in *Der Hals der Giraffe* reflect and reflect on the written story. The narrative follows Inge Lohmark as she comes to terms with the increased irrelevance not only of herself as a biology and physical education teacher, but also of her region—a small city in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern on the verge of shrinking itself out of existence. Lohmark views her personal and regional past from the vantage point of contemporary Germany.

Both novels use visual culture differently in the service of memory and narration. The photographs in *Blau steht dir nicht* are taken from various archives and historical sources. While they often depict people, there is an embedded materiality to some of them that deepens the texture of the novel. Ultimately, the photographs document and support the narrative, even encouraging the reader to see Jenny in some of them. The lithograph prints in *Der Hals der Giraffe* lend a scientific air to the novel. Some are diagrams of family trees or DNA while others use panoramic landscapes to evoke natural time and others still are reproductions of Ernst Haeckel's forms of nature. Schalansky's two novels contribute multi-medial narratives to Germany's ongoing memory contests. In this chapter, I argue that Judith Schalansky inserts memories of East Germany into a longer German literary and aesthetic tradition in order to complicate how the past is and can be remembered.

Part I: *Blau steht dir nicht* (2008): Collections on Display and the Maintenance of Borders

Judith Schalansky's debut novel, *Blau steht dir nicht*, obtains its name from an interaction between the main character, Jenny, and her grandmother. About to go out, the child Jenny is putting on her blue coat when her grandmother tells her to wear the red one instead because blue does not suit her.⁹³ This seemingly innocuous conversation reflects back on a similar one Jenny had with her grandfather. While walking along the beach looking for pieces of amber, Jenny is struck by the blue of the sailor's uniforms. She announces that she would like to become a *Matrösin*, a female sailor.⁹⁴ Her grandfather admonishes her—first by pointing out that grammatically there is no such word: “<<Das heißt Matrose. Und außerdem werden Mädchen keine Matrosen....>>”⁹⁵ In German, the only grammatically correct way to refer to sailors is the masculine noun *der Matrose*. The grandfather further aligns this grammatical imperative with cultural norms dictating masculinity and femininity: Girls cannot grow up to become sailors, and women are bad luck on a ship. Silenced by both language and culture, Jenny can only express her disappointment to herself.

Throughout the novel, Jenny pushes against the gender and geographical boundaries that seek to confine her. *Blau steht dir nicht* is divided into six chapters. In three chapters, Jenny uses the third person to recount her childhood in the German Democratic Republic, specifically her visits to her grandparents on the island Usedom in the Baltic Sea. In the other three chapters, Jenny narrates in the first person about her travel and her research trips after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the GDR. In

⁹³ Schalansky, Judith. *Blau steht dir nicht: Matrosenroman*. Hamburg: Marebuchverlag, 2008. Print. 60.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 68-69.

these chapters, Jenny searches for disappearing Soviet buildings, which are her objects of study. In a Sebaldian manner, she encounters Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein (1898-1948) and French photographer Claude Cahun (1894-1954), and through these interlocutors, the novel gains an intertextual, multi-medial depth and raises questions regarding subjectivity and the performance of gender.

Beyond Childhood Memoirs: Judith Schalansky and W.G. Sebald

At first read, *Blau steht dir nicht* exhibits the generic qualities of literature written by the Third Generation East. Literature written by this generation often focuses on childhood, the transition from childhood to adulthood, reunification, and memories of East Germany. For example, in his (re)reading of Sibylle Berg's oeuvre, Frank Degler notices an increased attention to East Germany and the new federal states in Berg's post-2001 work. A similar shift occurred in Julia Frank's oeuvre after the publication of *Lagerfeuer* in 2003. This shift coincided with the increased traction of Third Generation childhood memoirs in the early 2000s: Jana Hensel's *Zonenkinder* (2002), Claudia Rusch's *Meine Freie Deutsche Jugend* (2003), Jakob Hein's *Mein erstes T-Shirt* (2001), and Thomas Brussig's *Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee* (1999) to name a few. Critic Ursula März notes that these authors belong to a "Autorengeneration [], mit der die Literatur der deutschen Teilung ein neues Kapitel aufschlägt. Ein Kapitel, in dem nicht die archivierende Erinnerung dominiert, sondern die erinnernde Fiktion." Fictionalized memory rather than archived or experienced memory comprises the core of this literary trend, which often includes a child narrator to strengthen the authenticity of the story.

While *Blau steht dir nicht* engages the themes of memory, childhood, reunification, and memories of East Germany, Schalansky complicates these themes by having Jenny

alternate between the first and third person; by providing a circular definition of an East German *Heimat*; and by presenting German reunification as simultaneously central and catastrophic. In contrast to other Third Generation East childhood memoirs that utilize either a child narrator or a first personal plural (*wir*) narrator, *Blau steht dir nicht* has a young adult narrator who narrates in both the first and third person. This creates a critical distance between the adult narrator and her child self, allowing memory to be further mediated by a form of narration that is neither biographical nor collective. Michael Braun succinctly locates the narrative voice of *Blau steht dir nicht* in the “erzählende, erinnernde Ich.”⁹⁶

In contrast to other Third Generation East novels, in which *Heimat* is equated with the site of childhood, *Heimat* is difficult to locate in *Blau steht dir nicht*. As a child, Jenny was sent to her grandparents whenever her parents were experiencing marital difficulties. There are no scenes that take place in the parental home, and as an adult, Jenny is constantly traveling. Therefore, the novel does not present a stable home as the object of longing.

Furthermore, the novel destabilizes the presumed safety of the temporary home. While Jenny provisionally belonged to the Usedom community, she did not fully understand the limits of that belonging. As an adult, she realizes that the sailors she idolized as a child were actually an integral part of the system that kept her within the German Democratic Republic:

⁹⁶ Braun, Michael. “Judith Schalansky.” *Kritisches Lexikon zur deutschsprachigen Gegenwartsliteratur*. Web. 20 April 2016.

Die einzigen echten Matrosen, die es hier jemals gab, waren die Grenzbeschützer. Sie patrouillieren mit Schnellfeuerwaffen am Strand auf und ab, belauern den Luftraum, bewachen die Seegrenze, beschützen das Meer. Ein Radar horcht in die See. Mit Feldstechern zielen sie auf zwei sich nähernde Punkte, melden die Republikflucht zweier Jungen, die das Pionierhalstuch nicht mehr tragen dürfen. Sie haben die Heimat verraten, unser Land.⁹⁷

It remains unclear if this realization is sufficient to re-signify the sailors in her mind. To her child self, they represented gender fluidity and freedom of movement. The final sentence is also deliberately ambivalent. On the one hand, the third person plural *sie* refers to the two young men who attempted to flee the republic and in their escape attempt, betrayed their homeland. However, the sentence can also be read as a way of localizing home beyond any (temporary) national borders, attributing something eternal and, in a way, mythical, to the island.⁹⁸ In which case, it would be the border patrol agents who betrayed the homeland, who succumbed to a temporary restrictive regime.

While the island Usedom is a provisional home for Jenny, the island Oie was unreachable and unknowable: “Die Oie gab es nur für die Ferne. Ein Zeichen für die Schiffe und für Opas Sichtverhältnisse. Eigentlich war nicht klar, ob es die Oie wirklich gab.”⁹⁹ Even though Oie was a military base in the German Democratic Republic that Jenny would occasionally glimpse through the fog, within her limited worldview, it functions primarily on a symbolic level. It guided her grandfather’s understanding of the weather and represented an always unreachable horizon. When Jenny visits the island for

⁹⁷ Schalansky, Judith. *Blau steht dir nicht: Matrosenroman*. Hamburg: Marebuchverlag, 2008. 139.

⁹⁸ Viewing East German through the island trope: mythical, isolated, forgotten is common in contemporary German literature. See, for example: Tellkamp, Uwe. *Der Turm: Geschichte aus einem versunkenen Land*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2008. Print., Strubel, Antje Rávic. *Sturz der Tage in die Nacht*. Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 2011. Print., and Seiler, Lutz. *Kruso*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2014. Print. Furthermore, in *Atlas der abgelegenen Inseln: fünfzig Inseln, auf denen ich nie war und niemals sein werde* (2009), Judith Schalansky continued to explore the intersection of islands, travel, and narration. *Atlas der abgelegenen Inseln* received the *Stiftung Buchkunst* prize for most beautiful book and in early 2015 was adapted into a stage and radio play by Thom Luz.

⁹⁹ Schalansky, Judith. *Blau steht dir nicht: Matrosenroman*. Hamburg: Marebuchverlag, 2008. 16.

the first time as an adult, this trip is at once a return home and the continued expansion of borders. Only after the collapse of the Soviet Union and German reunification is Jenny able to physically stand on what she had, until that moment, perceived to be intangible. The novel ends with her coming into contact with the island: “Ich gehe an Land.”¹⁰⁰ However, this does not signify a return home or even a permanent relocation to firm ground. Rather, the first person narrator’s visit to Oie signifies an expansion of borders. Steffen Richter notes that in *Blau steht dir nicht*, “Judith Schalansky jedenfalls, [Jenny’s] Erfinderin, wird sich aus dieser gerahmten Welt in einen postsozialistischen Möglichkeitsraum hinausschreiben.”¹⁰¹ Even as Judith Schalansky, through Jenny, explores all of the expanded possibilities available after socialism, especially around gender and travel, she also contends with the continued limitations.

One of the places that Jenny is now able to visit is New York City. There she attempts to be in a time and place where “Alles ist möglich.” This phrase is repeated multiple times during her time in NYC. It is also during this trip that Jenny remembers German reunification as both central and catastrophic. Jenny has just completed a walking photography class in Manhattan when she discovers a figure dressed as a sailor who bears an uncanny resemblance to the French photographer Claude Cahun. She stalks Cahun’s double until they both end up in a gay club downtown. Jenny is asked to leave because “*Sorry, no girls.*”¹⁰² This rejection is jarring because, to her, Claude Cahun perfectly embodies freedom of gender expression and movement:

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 139.

¹⁰¹ Richter, Steffen. “Jenseits der Oie—Laudatio auf Judith Schalansky anlässlich der Verleihung des Förderpreises zum Lessingspreis 2013.” *Ostragehege*. 69 (2013): 59-60. Print. 59.

¹⁰² Schalansky, Judith. *Blau steht dir nicht: Matrosenroman*. Hamburg: Marebuchverlag, 2008. 85.

Alles ist möglich, in ihrem privaten Theater, in diesem Raum hier, unter Deck. Claude feiert ein neues Leben, ein anderes Ufer, ein drittes Geschlecht, krönt sich zum König, wählt sich zum Volk, erlässt Gesetze und redet von sich selbst in der dritten Person. Sie erfindet eine neue Sprache, zerlegt ihren Körper in Silben, buchstabiert ihn neu. Unter jeder Maske ist eine andere Maske.¹⁰³

As the narrator pursues Cahun's double, she imagines New York City as the site of endless possibility. It also serves as a cipher for similar liminal spaces—the private theater, the hidden room, below deck on a ship. Not only does Jenny idealize the third gender that Cahun represents, she also links this to a discursive form of expression—the third person. Thus the open, non-binary self-expression of gender and subjectivity is presented as an effect of narration. In narrating her childhood using the third person, Jenny linguistically grants herself the freedom she never experienced on Usedom. Emulating her idea of Cahun, “Sie erfindet eine neue Sprache, zerlegt ihren Körper in Silben, buchstabiert ihn neu.” Jenny remakes herself as a fragmented subject and gives her feminine body a masculine pronoun (*der Körper, der König*).¹⁰⁴

However, Jenny's seemingly limitless experience of gender and New York City is foiled by the bouncer of the gay club announcing, “*Sorry, no girls.*”¹⁰⁵ There is a narrative pause, indicated by a new paragraph, between the bouncer's words and the narrator's reaction. Her inability to comprehend his words may be caused by a language barrier, but it may also be a result of her continued challenging of gender borders. However, in this situation, actions speak louder than words, and she is gently pushed out into the street. On the one hand, everything becomes possible in New York City, especially after the narrator

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ The “neue Sprache” not only addresses gender fluidity but also alludes to Christa Wolf and her concept of “subjective authenticity.”

¹⁰⁵ Schalansky, Judith. *Blau steht dir nicht: Matrosenroman*. Hamburg: Marebuchverlag, 2008. 85.

encounters Claude Cahun's double. On the other hand, her experiences are still marked by her gender.

Jenny continues to explore New York City and eventually arrives on Coney Island, the former site of Dreamland Amusement Park (1903-1911). Even though Coney Island is closed for the season, the narrator imagines what it is like when open. Furthermore, she figuratively reconstructs Dreamland on its former site. Interspersed in her re-imagining of the site are 1) a fantasy of Claude Cahun during Carnival, 2) her contemplation of historical catastrophe, 3) an ambiguous reference to the 1911 Dreamland fire, and 4) her memories of German reunification. The chapter ends with her looking out across the ocean, and the novel includes a photograph of what she presumably sees.

Through Jenny's imagining of what Coney Island would normally look like and what Dreamland would have looked like, the narrative superimposes an imagined past onto the bare present. Along with enlivening Dreamland, Jenny also imagines its demise: "Dreamland ist vernichtet."¹⁰⁶ She recalls the 1911 fire that ravaged the site along with other historical catastrophes—the eruptions of Mount Vesuvius in Italy, the earthquakes in San Francisco, and the burning of Moscow. These imagined pasts serve as the vehicle through which the narrator remembers German reunification. Thus, Jenny's memories of German reunification are contextualized by natural and man-made catastrophes, allowing for German reunification to be remembered, in part, as a figurative one. The past is juxtaposed with the present—Dreamland with German reunification—through an introductory story and the use of tonal montage.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 94.

¹⁰⁷ I borrow the term tonal montage from Sergei Eisenstein. See Eisenstein, Sergei. "Methods of Montage." *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*. Trans Jay Leyda New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949. 72-83. (1929) Print.

As Jenny pursues Claude Cahun's double, she remembers a date with Erik, a character who only appears in this short vignette. In the narrative, it is unclear when the present stops and the memory begins, as the memory is told in the present tense. The memory begins with "Das Meer ist träge und schwarz."¹⁰⁸ While *Meer* can refer to either the Atlantic Ocean of the present or the Baltic Sea of her childhood, the next sentence clearly indicates the realm of memory: "Erik will, dass ich rechts gehe, wie es sich für eine Frau gehört. Wir betreten den *Preußenhof*, der früher *Glück auf!* hieß."¹⁰⁹ Again, the narrator's gender and the expectations placed upon her gender weigh heavily on her mind.

Once she reaches Coney Island, the narrator imbues the park with both the past and the future—with the Dreamland Amusement Park that was as well as the time machines and visions of the future promised by the original site. She highlights amusement—paradise, pleasure, and the sheer will of movement: "Die umzäunten Paradiese sind Zufluchtsort der Kirmesgeschöpfe, Endlager ausgedienter Zukunftsmaschinen, Geburtsort des Hot Dogs und Geburtsort der Rolltreppe, ein Förderband aus Holzplatten, *a pleasure to ride* auf dem Spielplatz der Welt, nur um der Bewegung willen."¹¹⁰

Her re-imagining of Dreamland is linguistically mirrored in her memories of reunification: "Ich stopfe mir lachend Schokolade in den Mund. Von den hundert Mark gebe ich fünf aus. Ich kaufe mir einen Taschenrechner und fahre Rolltreppen, stehe den ganzen Tage auf den wandernden Stufen, hoch und runter..."¹¹¹ The *Rolltreppen* of her past mirror the *Rolltreppen* of Coney Island's past. Jenny further remembers reunification

¹⁰⁸ Schalansky, Judith. *Blau steht dir nicht: Matrosenroman*. Hamburg: Marebuchverlag, 2008. 84.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. The miner's phrase "Glück auf" has a double meaning. It was commonly used in the Erzgebirge region to wish much success with mining, and was also used to express gratitude for having survived another day in the mines. The phrase was traditionally used in the Erzgebirge of former East Germany and now functions as a greeting in that region.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 86-87.

¹¹¹ Ibid, 92.

as a moment of possibility and centrality: “Alles ist möglich. Nicht ich reise, nicht ich bewege mich, sondern alles um mich herum. Die stumpfen Waren werden aus den Kaufhallen geräumt. Mit leeren Regalen verabschiedet sich das Land. Ein neues kommt, ein bunter Umzug, der bleibt.”¹¹² This memory still contains within itself all of the post-socialist possibility for which Jenny longed. The colorful consumer goods from the West replaced the lusterless ones from the East, replaced even the land itself.

With this memory, the narrative evokes recognizable tropes of German reunification—the speed with which East German names for things were replaced by West German names, the initial joy of the *Begrüßungsgeld* (welcome money), and the stark contrast between the greyness of the East and the colors of the West. Initially the fantasy of Dreamland and the memory of reunification are linked by amusement and capitalism—the joy of playful experience, of spending money, of being surrounded by consumer goods. To contrast the joy, the narrative also evokes a different trope of German reunification—that of the short lived welcome: “Unterschreiben Sie hier, den Kugelschreiber gibt’s dazu. Gratis. Willkommen in der neuen Welt.”¹¹³ East Germans’ disappointment with the West is juxtaposed by a second retelling of the 1911 Dreamland fire, during which the site is destroyed. Thus, the literal catastrophe of the Dreamland fire, reimagined and retold, becomes the site from which East German memories about reunification become central.

Jenny concludes her visit to Coney Island by looking out across the pier and taking a picture: “Ich nehme die Kamera und blicke durch den Sucher. Durch das kleine Fenster sieht der Atlantik nicht anders aus als der Achterwasser.”¹¹⁴ The camera viewer frames

¹¹² Ibid, 86-87.

¹¹³ Ibid, 93. The quick feeling of disillusionment with reunification can also be found in “Diebesgut” by Jenny Erpenbeck.

¹¹⁴ Schalansky, Judith. *Blau steht dir nicht: Matrosenroman*. Hamburg: Marebuchverlag, 2008. 95-96.

what she sees, allowing her to superimpose the *Achterwasser* of her childhood with the Atlantic Ocean of the narrative present. Through this mediated comparison and her own memories, Jenny temporarily dislocates herself spatially and temporally.

The photograph of the water included at the end of the chapter, with its grainy quality and the way in which the land merges with the water, evokes the photographs encountered throughout W.G. Sebald's oeuvre. Schalansky has already alluded to W.G. Sebald's *Die Ausgewanderten* (2001). In looking out across the beach, Jenny notices the closed fortune teller's booth. The beach and even the trash cans are empty, waiting to be filled at the start of the season. Furthermore, "Die Ausgewanderten sitzen auf bunten Plastikstühlen zusammen, die Nachfahren der Romanows neben den verdienten Rotgardisten. Alles, was Heimat verspricht, ist erlaubt."¹¹⁵ Even though the narrative speaks of the descendants of Russian imperialism and Chinese communism as emigrants, it is more than likely that Jenny is once again enlivening the empty landscape. It is not actual people that she sees sitting next to the closed fortune teller's booth, eating pierogis, but rather her imagination provides a kitsch reconstruction of home. In doing so, Schalansky shifts the Sebaldian focus from England and Germany farther East, making it clear that she is focusing on a different set of imagined emigrants. In contrast to Sebald, Schalansky does not explicitly engage with Jewishness.

This is not the only section in the novel to directly evoke Sebald. The epigraph to *Blau steht dir nicht* reads: "Auf der Schiffsbrücke stand mit gespreizten Beinen und wehenden Mützenbändern ein Matrose und machte mit zwei bunten Flaggen komplizierte semaphorische Zeichen in die Luft." This quote is taken directly from Sebald's *Schwindel*.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 95.

Gefühle (1990). The novel *Schwindel. Gefühle* uses subjective and cultural memory to tell a loosely connected four part story that is at once a travelogue, a fictionalized autobiography, and fictionalized biographies of Marie-Henri Beyle (Stendhal) and Franz Kafka. In the section of the novel from which the quote is taken, the narrator is recounting meeting Ernst Herbeck and accompanying him on a walk along the Danube River. Herbeck (1920-1991) was an Austrian poet who was institutionalized in 1940 and again indefinitely in 1946. The narrator's visit to Herbeck serves as the frame for his pointing out how uncanny all of the locations they encounter on their walk are. The narrator has been to these sites before, more recently with Olga on their way to visit her grandmother in a nursing home. He remembers looking out into the river and hearing a boat's fog horn.¹¹⁶ Another ship was also passing by, and he notes: "Auf der Schiffsbrücke stand mit gespreizten Beinen und wehenden Mützenbändern ein Matrose und machte mit zwei bunten Flaggen komplizierte semaphorische Zeichen in die Luft."¹¹⁷ It is unclear if the auditory and visual signs are coming from the same ship, thus emphasizing a message, or from both ships, in which case they are attempting to communicate with one another. This section of *Schwindel. Gefühle* is about communication, embedded memory, and fictionalized (auto)biographies, all of which can be found in *Blau steht dir nicht*.

However there are two significant differences between W.G. Sebald's oeuvre and Judith Schalansky's debut novel. The main difference is that Sebald's work is entrenched in trauma. Lise Patt emphasizes the amateur aspects of the photographs—overworked,

¹¹⁶ Christopher C. Gregory-Guider notes that Sebald often frames visual material acoustically. See: Gregory-Guider, Christopher C. "Memorial Sights/Sites Sebald, Photography, and the Art of Autobiography in *The Emigrants*." *Searching for Sebald: Photography After W.G. Sebald*. Ed Lise Patt. Los Angeles: Institute of Cultural Inquiry, 2007. 516-541. Print.

¹¹⁷ Sebald, Winfried Georg. *Schwindel, Gefühle*. Frankfurt am Main: Eichborn, 1990. Print.

blurry, and at times difficult to distinguish from one another—in order to read them as representations of trauma and the uncanny.¹¹⁸ Christopher C. Gregory-Guider understands the photographs in *The Emigrants* to be metaphorical representations of the subjective experiences of trauma.¹¹⁹ In comparison, *Blau steht dir nicht* is less about trauma, or even ruin gazing, and more about cycles of destruction and reconstruction—from Soviet and socialist icons to the amusement parks on Coney Island. Moreover, Schalansky's novel investigates Germanness not through the Holocaust, which features strongly in Sebald's work, but rather through an East German subject position.

Secondly, questions of gender are central to *Blau steht dir nicht*. The subtitle of the novel as *Matrosenroman* signals a masculine adventure story, and the epigraph taken from Sebald posits the (male) sailor as the one who communicates and signifies. For Jenny, the figure of the sailor represents gender fluidity and unfettered physical movement, even when her experiences challenge this conceptualization. *Blau steht dir nicht* further creates a space for the female or gender ambiguous sailor through Jenny's desire to be a *Matrösin*; in her pursuit of Claude Cahun's double, who is dressed like a sailor; and by including multiple photographs of sailors in which a girl or woman is featured in the central position. Schalansky's novel ultimately challenges the naturalness of the male sailor as the one who is free, the one who wanders, and the one who remembers.

¹¹⁸ Patt, Lise. "Introduction: Searching for Sebald: What I Know for Sure." *Searching for Sebald: Photography After W.G. Sebald*. Ed Lise Patt. Los Angeles: Institute of Cultural Inquiry, 2007. 16-97. Print.

¹¹⁹ Gregory-Guider, Christopher C. "Memorial Sights/Sites: Sebald, Photography, and the Art of Autobiography in *The Emigrants*." *Searching for Sebald: Photography After W.G. Sebald*. Ed Lise Patt. Los Angeles: Institute of Cultural Inquiry, 2007. 516-541. Print.



Image Ten: female sailor, *Blau steht dir nicht*¹²⁰

Natural Objects, Generational Memory, and Social Belonging

Within all of its narrative complexity, *Blau steht dir nicht* strongly embraces the childhood trope of Third Generation East novels. As a child, Jenny spends a significant amount of time on Usedom. There, she participates in her grandparents' daily lives and strives to belong through her engagement with the natural objects she encounters. Both of her grandparents are collectors of sorts—her grandmother displays her treasures (*Schätze*) on the veranda window sill and her grandfather selectively includes his trophies (*Trophäen*). Jenny longs for the objects she finds on her daily walks with her grandfather to be worthy of display, instead of being tossed into a jar in the hallway.

¹²⁰ Schalansky, Judith. *Blau steht dir nicht: Matrosenroman*. Hamburg: Marebuchverlag, 2008. 79.

The novel opens with a domestic scene. Jenny and her grandparents are eating breakfast on the veranda. Rather than looking outward, Jenny's gaze lingers on her grandmother's window sill display:

Dort waren die Schätze der Großmutter sorgfältig aufgereiht; eine Holzpuppe aus Ungarn, eine Vase mit blauäugigen Pfauenfedern, eine flammenfarbene Korallenkette in einer offenen Schatulle, zusammengerollt wie eine Schlange. Etwas abseits lag ein Seeigel. Er war hohl, und nur ein umlaufendes Netz von bukligen Poren verriet, wo einmal seine Nadeln gewesen waren. Mit der Zeit waren sie abgefallen, ein Haufen nutzloser schwarzer Spitzen

The reader is encouraged to adopt Jenny's gaze as she lingers over the objects: a wooden doll from Hungary, a vase containing a peacock feather, a flame colored coral bracelet, a sea urchin from the now former Yugoslavia, and various dried flowers and branches. On the one hand, the window display evokes natural time. The objects reference cyclical, natural time—wood; animal fragments, animal remains, and fossils; and dead plants. On the other hand, the display is marked by human time. They have all been altered—either through mechanical process or through the process of selection. Furthermore, the grandmother collected these objects during various trips, and they hold a special significance for her. Therefore, all of the objects on the window sill function as souvenirs—selected, valued, and on display. The objects, except for the sea urchin, are lined up next to one another. The peacock feather is nestled in a vase, and the coral bracelet, curled up like a snake, rests in a small, open casket (*Schatulle*). The arrangement of the objects evokes the three-dimensional space of a museum display both in terms of height and breadth further underscoring the transition the objects have made from natural to material culture.

As her gaze travels over the objects, Jenny remembers what her grandmother has told her about them; some she collected along the beach, and the sea urchin reminds her of

the only time she flew in an airplane. Similar to the objects in Jenny Erpenbeck's *Dinge, die verschwinden*, the natural phenomena that Jenny observes are depositories for memory. These objects are intimately connected to her grandmother's biography, and aside from this brief glimpse at her life through Jenny's recollection, the narrative reveals very little about the grandmother. The sea urchin is also given a biography of sorts. It is allotted significantly more narrative time through description and has a specific memory attached to it. It is described as hollow and encircled by empty holes where its needles used to be. The sea urchin also stands slightly apart from the other objects on display. The partial biography thus allows it to remain slightly mysterious. While it has a place of origin—the former Yugoslavia—the context of its selection is obscured. The reader only knows that it was collected before “das Mädchen auf der Welt war.”¹²¹ “Das Mädchen,” however, could refer to either Jenny or Jenny's mother.

The grandmother's memories imbue the window sill objects on display with added significance. Furthermore, there is one natural object that, while mentioned, is never encountered in the diegetic world—the seahorse. As she continues to look over the window sill display, Jenny remembers her grandmother explaining that in the now former Yugoslavia, she was able to swim with seahorses. Because of the affective register of the story and the fact that the seahorse appears on the Zinnowitz coat of arms, Jenny constantly looks for seahorses when she walks along the beach in order to solidify her connection to her grandparents and the Baltic Sea community. Shuffled between her parents and grandparents, Jenny does not have a firm sense of home or belonging. However, as the

¹²¹ Schalansky, Judith. *Blau steht dir nicht: Matrosenroman*. Hamburg: Marebuchverlag, 2008. 7.

narrative has demonstrated with the island Oie and post-socialist freedom of movement, perhaps home does not necessarily need to be stable.

Jenny further attempts to solidify her belonging during her daily walks with her grandfather by attributing symbolic or social meaning to natural objects. During one such walk she remembers a visit to the maritime museum in Stralsund, where she saw a looming skeleton of a stranded whale. Prompted by this memory, she asks her grandfather if he has ever seen a beached whale. In response, he tells her about the beached whale in Ahlbeck in 1894. The narrative transitions from this dialog to Jenny's thoughts, and the following paragraph is written alternatively in the simple past tense and the subjunctive. Jenny imagines (*stellte sich vor*) not the beached whale of 1894, but whale bones on the beach. In her imagination, she conflates the beached whale with the museum display of a whale skeleton. Thus, the imagined whale bones on the beach become the conduit through which she is linked to her grandfather's story, his biography, and his history.

Jenny struggles against her grandfather's indifference by imagining herself at the center rather than at the periphery. She continues her fantasy of the whale bones on the beach by allowing herself to pose with the skeleton for an imagined photograph: "Sie hätte sich gern mit einem riesigen Walknochen fotografieren lassen. Auf diesem Foto wäre sie in der Mitte, zu beiden Seiten der gleiche Abstand, gerahmt vom Weißblau der See."¹²² In this fantasy, instead of the skeleton, she would be in the center of the frame. However, Jenny consciously knows that this would never actually happen: "Nicht wie auf den Fotos, die der Großvater von ihr gemacht hatte. Darauf stand sie immer am Rand, als hätte sie sich gerade eben noch ins Bild gedrängelt."¹²³ She fights against the reality of how she is

¹²² Ibid, 21.

¹²³ Ibid, 21.

photographed by heightening her role in the imagined photograph: “Mit einem Walfischknochen würde sie den Helden spielen, in der Mitte stehen, wie ein Fischer in der Ostsee-Zeitung, wenn er einen besonderen großen Fang gemacht hatte.”¹²⁴ Her fantasy evokes (colonial) hunting photographs in which the hunter poses with his or her prey. She further augments her hunter role with that of hero, a position she sees as being occupied by the male fishers. While Jenny shifts the focus from adult men to girl children, her triumphalist fantasy is undercut by the childish innocence attributed to her by the narrative voice, as well as Jenny’s anachronistic imagining of the whale—the historical whale is re-imagined in the narrative present, and it is bones rather than flesh. Through the image of the whale, the narrative evokes the museum’s ability to compress both time and space. The whale is simultaneously natural and cultural; real and imagined; dead and dying; and in the past as well as in the present.

The subsequent series of photographs is further meant to underscore how Jenny stands at the edge of her childhood—pushed there by both the landscape and her grandfather’s inability to see her.

¹²⁴ Ibid, 22.



Image Eleven: Jenny series, *Blau steht dir nicht*¹²⁵

All three photographs show a young girl, bundled up in a coat and hat so that even her face is barely visible. She is always to the left of the frame, with the beach and the sea as the focal points and thus occupying the majority of the photographic space. In the third photograph, she is literally cut out of the frame. The right side of her body is missing—so that even if she had pushed her way into the photograph, she did not do a good job of it.

Even though Jenny is unsuccessful, in this combined narrative-visual moment, in placing herself at the center of her grandfather's vision, of the landscape, of the photograph, or of her own story, she eventually achieves a moment of fulfillment when she finds a prize piece of amber. On another walk with her grandfather, Jenny remembers that she once found a worthy piece of amber: "Einmal hatte Jenny einen Bernstein gefunden, der gelb war wie das Bier, das der Großvater abends trank."¹²⁶ The awkward simile is both indicative of Jenny's age and her intense longing to align herself with her grandfather.

¹²⁵ Ibid, 21.

¹²⁶ Ibid, 101.



Image Twelve: Jenny with amber, *Blau steht dir nicht*¹²⁷

In the photograph on the following page, a young child stands facing the reader. She is in the foreground, and her body dominates the photographic space. However, similar to the other photographs, it is cropped in such a way that challenges the depicted child's bodily integrity. The top of her head, her right elbow and her legs below the knee are outside of the frame.

In contrast to the earlier series of photographs that demonstrates Jenny's position on the periphery of her life, this one includes a material layer (the amber) that highlights Jenny's centrality. The amber cannot be read as a Barthian punctum, as it is highly relevant to both the image and the narrative; however, it does accentuate the heartbreaking truth of the depicted moment: "the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially."¹²⁸ The photograph the reader sees represents an enduring reminder of a momentary event. The photograph of Jenny demonstrates that centrality itself, however

¹²⁷ Ibid, 102.

¹²⁸ Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida*. 1980. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 2010. Print. 4.

tangible, is only ever a fleeting experience. Her right hand is outstretched, as if perpetually offering the piece of amber to the unseen recipient—her grandfather and also every person who reads her story, who sees this image.

Jenny uses amber, a natural object, in her attempts to elevate her significance within her extended family and provisional community. Amber also gains geopolitical and historical significance when Jenny and her grandfather encounter border patrol guards during one of their treasure hunts along the beach. The two are approached by a guard who questions their identity and motives for being where they are; yet, when the guard recognizes Jenny's grandfather with a casual “<<Ach, Sie sind's>>”¹²⁹, the situation is diffused, and the two continue with their walk. Jenny's grandfather is identified as belonging and as a non-threat to the beach-border security. The flashlight (*Scheinwerfer*) that the pair are using to examine the objects swept in by the tide and to look for amber is overshadowed both literally and figuratively by the border guard's own, bigger flashlight (*Scheinwerfer*) as well as the floodlights (*Scheinwerfer*) that could be periodically encountered along the beach.¹³⁰

In the act of collecting natural objects, Jenny encounters institutions of the state meant to protect the borders of the state. The East German context is made evident in the ways in which the amber—a natural object attributed social significance and display value—comes into contact with the flashlights and searchlights of both private citizens and state officials. Jenny does not consciously recognize the oppressive nature of control at the level of the state. In contrast, her grandfather partially recognizes the danger of borders and

¹²⁹ Schalansky, Judith. *Blau steht dir nicht: Matrosenroman*. Hamburg: Marebuchverlag, 2008. 100.

¹³⁰ The original uses *Scheinwerfer* instead of the more common *Taschenlampe* for the flashlight that Jenny and her grandfather carry.

border control. In the encounter with the border guard, he quickly distances himself from potential state oppression with a slight comment: “<<Komm, lass uns lieber mal gehen...Ich hatte ihn in der Schule. Der war nicht so helle.>>”¹³¹ While recognizing a moment of danger, Jenny’s grandfather does not overall question the validity of national or natural borders: “Das Land musste ständig geschützt werden, die Natur, die Tiere, die Menschen, die Grenze. Deshalb fuhr nachts ein W-Fünfzig am Strand entlang und suchte mit einem riesigen Scheinwerfer das Wasser ab. Und deshalb flogen abends die Düsenjäger über die Küste.”¹³² The flashlights, floodlights, and search lights (*Scheinwerfer*) are again instrumental in maintaining (border) control. All of these forms of illumination, of bringing the object into focus, serve very different purposes along the beach.

Jenny’s and her grandfather’s encounter with the German Democratic Republic state agent during their morning walk evokes another moment in the narrative when state power along the beach-border manifests itself. In the first chapter of the novel, Jenny is gazing out into the sea, preparing to swim, and her gaze becomes a vehicle for memory. She remembers seeing a swimmer go too far out. She remembers hearing the lifeguard giving the order to return, and with each repetition the lifeguard’s warning becomes more and more threatening. Jenny also remembers feeling relief that the swimmer chooses to return: “Jenny dankte [the lifeguard] heimlich, dass er den Schwimmer von seinem Plan abgebracht hatte.”¹³³ The use of the word “plan” in order to describe what would otherwise have been an innocent swim that only threatened personal safety both evokes the powers of

¹³¹ Ibid, 101.

¹³² Ibid, 70-71.

¹³³ Ibid, 23.

the state and indicates Jenny's nascent understanding of state power. In order for there to be a plan to escape, to challenge the borders of the state, the borders themselves would have first needed to have been established.

Judith Schalansky's debut novel tempers childhood memories with an adult narrator. The main character, Jenny, grew up in the German Democratic Republic and spent a significant amount of time walking along the Baltic Sea beach. Along the shoreline, Jenny explored geo-political and gender borders. She searched for pieces of amber and other precious natural objects left behind by the tide, hoping that the objects would solidify her belonging to the Baltic Sea community. As a child she longed to belong; however, as an adult Jenny explores the world that was once closed off to her. Similarly, as a child she romanticized the sailors she would regularly see. However, even then she understood the limits of her romantization because she would never be able to fit in with them because of her gender. Furthermore, when she pursues an androgynous sailor through New York City after German reunification, Jenny is reminded of the limitations imposed on her gender. The geo-political borders shifted after reunification, but other things remained the same.

Part II: *Der Hals der Giraffe* (2011): The Natural Process of Musealization

Judith Schalansky's second novel, *Der Hals der Giraffe*, intensely focuses on one character and one region after they have been moved by forces beyond their control into the German post-reunification present. The third person narrator closely follows Inge Lohmark, a biology and physical education teacher at the recently re-named *Charles-Darwin-Gymnasium* in an unnamed town in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. The narrative takes place on three representative days spread out over the course of a school year. The

novel is divided into three sections, each describing one day in Inge Lohmark's life. The first section, *Naturhaushalte* (ecosystems), corresponds with the first day of school. Inge meets her new and final class of ninth graders. Her car refuses to start, so she is forced to take the same bus home as her students. During the course of this day, she remembers and misses her adult daughter, Claudia, who lives in California; she observes but does not intervene when one of her students, Ellen, is bullied by her classmates; and she is intrigued by another one of her students, Erika, who seems to stand apart from the crowd. Finally, as she waits for the bus, Lohmark observes her environment and reads it against her own theory of natural ruins. The second section of the novel, *Vererbungsvorgänge* (processes of heredity), depicts a day located roughly in the middle of the school year. Lohmark takes the bus to school, gives a quiz in class, and remembers and misses her daughter. The third and final section, *Entwicklungslehre* (evolution), depicts an exceptional day during the week before Easter break. As she drives to work, Inge Lohmark observes but does not intervene in the aftermath of the school bus' minor accident. She does, however, drive out of her way to unexpectedly give Erika a ride to school. In the middle of the day, Lohmark is asked to visit the principal's office, where she is confronted with her yearlong implicit support of Ellen's harassment. Her earlier act of kindness towards Erika contrasts starkly with her general lack of involvement in her students' lives, which, in the case of Ellen, proves to be harmful. She is essentially fired from the school, though she can teach through to the end of the academic year.

Judith Schalansky intentionally designed *Der Hals der Giraffe* as a book reminiscent of books designed and published in the German Democratic Republic.¹³⁴ The

¹³⁴ Platthaus, Andreas. "Wie tut man Büchern Gewalt an, Frau Schalansky?" *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. 12 September 2012. Web. 20 May 2014.

linen used to bind the first edition evokes East German books from the 1980s and serves to bring a particularly East German perspective into the contemporary literary field. For Schalansky, form and content are integral to one another, and often form is more important to her than content: “Hier wie da ist es nicht der Inhalt, der die Form fordert. Vielmehr sind Form und Inhalt auf der Suche nacheinander. Und nicht selten ist es die Form, die im Arbeitsprozeß den Inhalt bezwingt, und das Buch überhaupt erst möglich macht.”¹³⁵ The stamped design on the hardcover encourages the reader to trace not only the individual letters of the title and author’s name but also the outline of the depicted giraffe.

The materiality of the cover is complemented by the images included in the novel. A quick skim reveals twenty-four lithograph prints, ranging from a centrally focused single cell organism to a two page spread of natural phenomena. Due to the overwhelming presence of images, Elisabeth Heyne cleverly calls the book a *Bilderroman* instead of a *Bildungsroman*.¹³⁶ Initially, the narrative-image relationship may appear to be simply illustrative. For example, Lohmark complains about aging and compares her years to the rings of a tree. A few pages later, there is a drawing of a bisected tree. However, this particular image also functions on a metaphorical level. Lohmark is rooted in her East German upbringing and pedagogical training. She cannot simply be uprooted because her environment has changed. In this section, I first locate *Der Hals der Giraffe* within the genre of the *Bildungsroman* before more closely exploring how memory is evoked through narration and images of natural phenomena.

¹³⁵ Schalansky, Judith. “Wie ich Bücher mache.” *Belle triste* 30. (2004). Print. See also Platthaus, Andreas. “Wie tut man Büchern Gewalt an, Frau Schalansky?” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. 12 September 2012. Web. 20 May 2014.

¹³⁶ Heyne, Elisabeth. ““Nichts ging über die Radialsymmetrie”. Zu einer bioästhetischen Poetik der Symmetrie zwischen Text und Bild in Judith Schalanskys *Der Hals der Giraffe*.” *Textpraxis. Digitales Journal für Philologie*. 9. (February 2014): 1-18. Web. 4.

Forms of Memory: Narration, Biology, and Morphology

In *Der Hals der Giraffe*, science functions as a vehicle through which the aesthetic-literary is celebrated. This is exemplified by the posters of Ernst Haeckel's *Quallen* (jellyfish) and Claude Monet's water lilies that are placed side by side. After teaching her first biology class of the new school year, Lohmark walks out of her classroom and witnesses her fellow teacher Karola Schwanneke, with the help of her students, hang posters of Claude Monet's water lilies. Inge Lohmark and Karola Schwanneke are presented as foils. Inge Lohmark maintains a strict distance between herself and her students, whereas Schwanneke cultivates an informal, interpersonal relationship with her students. For Lohmark, these differences are made manifest in their two different, yet side-by-side, posters. However, what she cannot see or is unwilling to see, are their similarities. Schwanneke's husband left her because she could not have children, and Lohmark is essentially without a family. She and her husband lead separate lives, and she has lost touch with her daughter.

It is the combination of narration and image that reveals just how close Lohmark is to Schwanneke, though she refuses to see these connections. As she witnesses the new poster going up, Lohmark is outraged that Schwanneke would dare to not only transgress the previously established division of hallway wall space, but also because her fellow teacher had the audacity to place Monet's confusing, muddled, and impressionistic water lilies at the same physical and metaphorical level as her posters of Ernst Haeckel's jellyfish. Unaware of Lohmark's condemnation, Schwanneke begins discussing the merits of impressionist art. Lohmark replies with factual revisions of Schwanneke's statements,

yet internally, she articulates her understanding of beauty and nature, to which only the reader has access. Their debate is formally interrupted by the inclusion of two drawings. The left hand page is a reproduction of Plate 28 from Ernst Haeckel's *Art Forms in Nature*. The right hand page reproduces Plate 46.

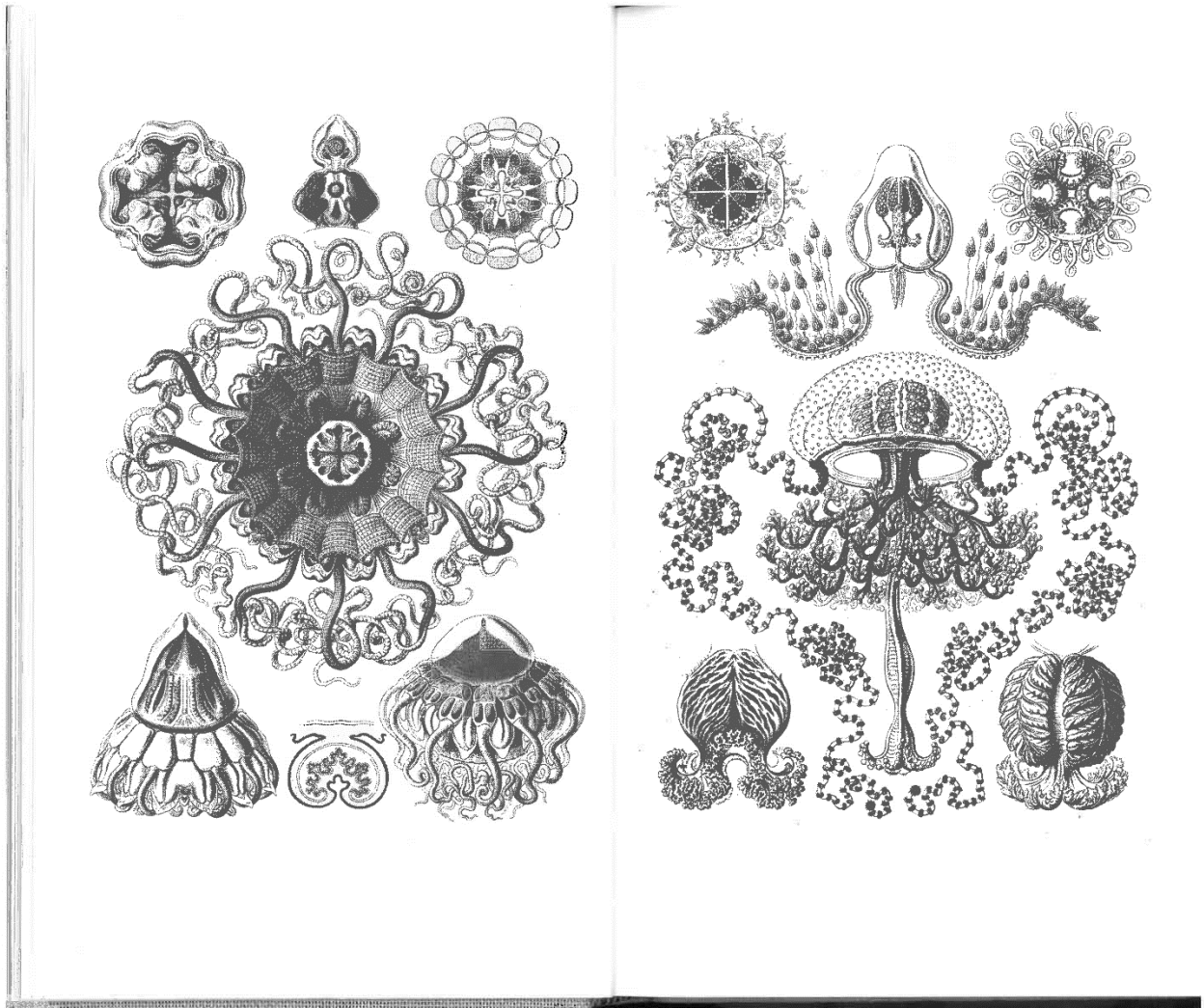


Image Thirteen: Judith Schalansky's print of Haeckel's Jellyfish, *Der Hals der Giraffe*¹³⁷

¹³⁷ Schalansky, Judith. *Der Hals der Giraffe: Bildungsroman*. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011. Print. 32-33.

The drawings are intricate and visually stunning; however, the narrative dialog continues around them. Karola Schwanneke highlights the similarities between the jellyfish and the water lilies. Inge Lohmark replies internally with the following:

Von welch bestechender Klarheit, von welch entschlossener Pracht waren dagegen Haeckels Quallen: Die untere Ansicht einer Taschenqualle mitsamt ihrem fliederfarbenen, gekräuselten Strahlenkranz, das achteckige Mundrohr wie ein Blütenkelch. In der Mitte der purpurne Trichter der Scheibenqualle. Wallendes Tentakelhaar, das einem blau gerüschten Unterrock entsprang. Von winzigen, mit Sternen kristallin verzierten Schwestern umschwärmt. Und ganz rechts die gläserne Herrlichkeit der Blumenqualle, aus deren genopptem Schirm zwei nahezu symmetrische Fangfäden wuchsen. Ausladende Girlanden, mit roten Nesselknöpfen wie von Perlen besetzt. Gerahmt von zwei Querschnitten. Einer mit dem rot-weiß-flammenden Gefieder einer Rembrandt-Tulpe, der andere gleichmäßig wie ein Kaukasierhirn.¹³⁸

This description interrupts the flow of the narrative and requires a re-viewing of the drawings that may have only been given a cursory look. The description begins with Plate 38, the *Taschenquallen*. The reader is guided through a view of the animal's underside and encouraged to marvel at the colorful and radial biological patterns. The reader's gaze is further guided with the narrative instruction to look "ganz rechts" at the "gläserne Herrlichkeit der Blumenqualle." The jellyfish, symmetrical in its representation blossoms out and is framed by two cross sections, one that resembles a Rembrandt tulip, the other a human brain.

Lohmark's science is deeply indebted to artistic representation and reproduction. As a natural scientist in the late 19th and early 20th century, Ernst Haeckel focused on archetypes and origins, structures and patterns, as well as the interactions of individual organisms with their environments. In admiring Haeckel's jellyfish, Inge Lohmark accesses a type of scientific inquiry dedicated to revealing underlying patterns (linked to

¹³⁸ Schalansky, Judith. *Der Hals der Giraffe: Bildungsroman*. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011. Print. 34.

aesthetics rather than scientific accuracy), a practice with which she deeply identifies. However, she is also accessing a methodology committed to the aesthetic representation of perceived nature. While she does not acknowledge her debt to aesthetics, she does use metaphorical language to compare a bisected jellyfish segment to one of Rembrandt's tulips. In this way, the narrative reveals its understanding beyond the limitations of the main character.

Patterns of Interaction: Genre and Character

Whereas *Blau steht dir nicht* employed tropes of Third Generation East childhood memoirs in order to tell a coming-of-age story through memory, displays, travel, and photographs, *Der Hals der Giraffe* has been read as a *Schulroman* or a *Bildungsroman*.¹³⁹ In the following, I locate Judith Schalansky's second novel between the genres of *Bildungsroman* and *Ankunftsroman*; yet, at the same time that the novel evokes these genres, it also undermines their conventions. Both of these literary traditions have roots in the region of Germany that became and is no longer the German Democratic Republic.

¹³⁹Volker Hage lists *Der Hals der Giraffe* among *Struz der Tage in die Nacht* by Antje Rávic Strubel (2011), *Das Mädchen* by Angelika Klüssendorf (2011), and *Die Kältezentrale* by Inka Parei (2011) as surprisingly good reads that thematize the end and aftereffects of German reunification from an East German perspective. See: Hage, Volker. "Nur die Natur ist gerecht." *Der Spiegel*. 10 October 2011: 140. Print. In his review of *Der Hals der Giraffe*, Tilman Krause labels *Der Turm* by Uwe Tellkamp (2008) as the "novel to end all novels" on memories of East Germany and considers all other novels on the subject as unnecessary. See: Krause, Tilman. "Der neue Mensch ist der alte." *Die Welt*. 29 October 2011, sec. Literarische Welt: 1. Jochen Schimmang locates *Der Hals der Giraffe* as part of the reemergence of the novel as a genre of consequence in contemporary German literature. See: Schimmang, Jochen. "Immer nur diese Schwarten." *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. 5 September 2012. Web. 20 May 2014. Print. Emily Jeremiah approaches *Der Hals der Giraffe*, *Struz der Tage in die Nacht* by Antje Rávic Strubel (2011), *Geschwindigkeit des Sommers* by Julia Schoch (2009), and *Die Unmöglichkeit des vierhändigen Spiels* by Stefan Moster (2009) through the rubric of shame. Jeremiah argues that these novels, set in East Germany and the new federal states, present memory as both relational and generational. See Jeremiah, Emily. "Shameful Stories: The Ethics of East German Memory Contest in Fiction by Julia Schoch, Stefan Moster, Antje Rávic Strubel, and Judith Schalansky." *Edinburgh German Yearbook*. Ed. Emily Jeremiah and Frauke Matthes. 7. (2013): 65-84. Print.

With *Der Hals der Giraffe*, Judith Schalansky contributes to a literary history that cannot exclude East/east German voices.

Upon first reading, *Der Hals der Giraffe* appears to be a typical *Schulroman*. The majority of narrative time is spent within the confines of the school, and the novel highlights the complex relationship among teachers and between the protagonist and her students. However, unlike other contemporary *Schulromane*, for example Juli Zeh's *Spieltrieb* (2004), Schalansky's novel focuses on the interior life of the teacher rather than any student.¹⁴⁰ Because of this, *Der Hals der Giraffe* is often compared to Nina Bußmann's *Große Ferien* (2012).¹⁴¹ Both novels highlight the teacher's lack of interest in their profession, emphasize the isolation—both physical and psychological—of the teacher protagonist, and stage the plot against a backdrop of cultivated nature. However, Bußmann has created a precocious and generally disliked student antagonist, which allows the reader to sympathize more easily with the teacher's detachment from his student's everyday life. In contrast, Lohmark takes on an antagonistic position toward her students and colleagues. She willingly and knowingly allows Ellen, one of the students in her biology class, to be bullied because she views Ellen as a “dumpfes Duldungstier.”¹⁴²

Der Hals der Giraffe is more commonly read as a *Bildungsroman*, or more accurately, an anti-*Bildungsroman*.¹⁴³ Imprinted below the title of Schalansky's novel, the

¹⁴⁰ Judith Schalansky also designed the cover and typography for Clemens Setz' *Indigo* (2012), which predominately takes place in a boarding school for children and youth with the mysterious Indigo disease.

¹⁴¹ Bußmann, Nina. *Große Ferien*. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2012. Print. See: Krause, Tilman. “Wie halten Sie das eigentlich aus?: Nina Bußmanns Schulgeschichte der besonderen, beklemmenden Art.” *Die Welt*. 5 May 2012, sec. Literarische Welt: 6. *LexisNexis*. Web. 30 Jan. 2016. and Schimmang, Jochen. “Immer nur diese Schwarten.” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. 5 September 2012. Web. 20 May 2014.

¹⁴² Schalansky, Judith. *Der Hals der Giraffe: Bildungsroman*. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011. Print. 20.

¹⁴³ Most critics of Schalansky's novel read it as an anti-*Bildungsroman*. See, for example, Rüdener, Ulrich. Rev. of *Der Hals der Giraffe*, by Judith Schalansky. *Stuttgarter Zeitung*. 11 October 2011. 39. Print.

author's designation *Bildungsroman* makes initial sense. After all this is a novel about a biology teacher's concerns with evolutions, progress, and change. According to Lamarckian biology and Lohmark's interpretation thereof, the giraffe stretched its neck in order to reach the leaves from the top of the tree, and, in passing this characteristic to its offspring, increased its chances of survival.¹⁴⁴ Furthermore, the subtitle contains within itself a reference to classical *Bildungsromane* such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* as well as an indirect reference to the 18th and 19th century natural scientists and philosophers deeply involved in the aestheticization of science.

Lohmark's classroom and seating chart could potentially support the idea of a *Bildungsroman*. The ninth graders in her class are going through puberty, are growing up, and are beginning to find their place in society. However, these children are stuck because not only has Lohmark already determined their lives for them based the patterns of inheritance she has observed but also because there is no society into which they can grow—the region is in decline, and the German Democratic Republic does not exist anymore

As a high school teacher, Inge Lohmark implements a style of teaching that relies upon and perpetuates her social understanding of Charles Darwin's biological "survival-of-the-fittest." She quickly identifies social patterns and classifies her students according to her own system: "Sie kannte sie alle. Sie erkannte sie sofort."¹⁴⁵ Her seating chart, depicted across a two page spread, includes designations such as "*Ellen Dumpfes Duldungstier*" and "*Erika Das Heidekraut*."¹⁴⁶ From her initial encounter with her students,

¹⁴⁴ It is not coincidental that Lohmark is similar to Lamarck, adding yet another layer to Inge Lohmark's affinity to Lamarckian evolution.

¹⁴⁵ Schalansky, Judith. *Der Hals der Giraffe: Bildungsroman*. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011. Print. 19.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 20-21.

she separates those she perceives as weak from those she reads as strong. Thereafter, she does not need to interact with them on an individual level or treat them as subjective human beings capable of change. However, her students are going through puberty—a stage of biological and social flux. Their growing into adulthood challenges her overarching assessment of their categorical stability.

Contrary to the novel's subtitle of *Bildungsroman*, Inge Lohmark's life is marked by stillness and isolation. Her career is at a standstill because she refuses to adopt student centered West German teaching methods, but even this refusal feels irrelevant as the school has stopped accepting new students. Lohmark actively resists change—in her pedagogy, in her relationship to her husband and daughter, and in relation to her environment. Even though she may have been an ideal citizen during the German Democratic Republic, she is unwilling and unable to successfully integrate into her post-reunification context.

Therefore, I read *Der Hals der Giraffe* in the East German literary tradition of the *Ankunftsroman*. The term was coined from Brigitte Reimann's novel *Ankunft im Alltag* (1961), which was one of the first to thematize the new generation's arrival in a historically constructed idea of real existing socialism in East Germany. Reimann's novel is simultaneously a coming-of-age narrative for the three protagonists and a story of work and industrial production in which both character and country are assembled. By these standards, Inge Lohmark undeniably arrived—she was a successful teacher, wife, and mother during the German Democratic Republic. It is only after German reunification that her arrival is called into question. As such, Inge's story challenges the very category of

arrival by depicting the moments that come after arriving, which she had to go through again after reunification, as well as the seismic shifts to everyday life.

At the level of genre, *Der Hals der Giraffe* engages with and complicates the expected genre of *Bildungsroman* as well as the corollary one of *Ankunftsroman*. The characters, too, are complex and difficult to pin down. However, before I delve into the characters, I will first show that Inge Lohmark is not the narrator of the novel. In an early review of *Hals der Giraffe*, Wieland Freund describes the novel as “222 Seiten nahtloser innerer Monolog, abgehangene, ausgereifte Figurenrede....Schalansky’s ungnädige, unzuverlässige Erzählerin Inge Lohmark...”¹⁴⁷ Freund attributes the narration to the main character, closely aligning the Lohmark with the narrator and implicitly the author. It is necessary to differentiate between the non-perceptible third person narrator and the character Inge, through which the narrative is focalized. Lohmark is not the narrator of her own story. The narrator has access to historical facts and insights obscured by Inge’s didactic relationship to her world. One reviewer notes that even though Inge is despicable and repulsive, she is at times described with ambivalence, allowing the reader to enjoy Inge’s perspective: “übersehen wird meist, mit welcher Ambivalenz sie geschildert wird, wie viel Spaß es dem Leser macht, den bösen Blick der gnadenlosen Frau zu teilen.”¹⁴⁸

In what is presented as a typical school day in the second section of the novel, Inge attempts to track the lines of inheritance between her students and their parents: “Dass jedes Kind ein ganz besonderes Individuum sei, vor allem aber ihres. Was sie nicht sagte! Der klägliche Versuch, das eigene verfehlte Leben durch eine weniger misstratene

¹⁴⁷ Freund, Wieland. “Unsere persönliche Shortlist: Judith Schalansky.” *Die Welt*. 10 September 2011, sec. Literarische Welt: 2. Print.

¹⁴⁸ Untitled. *Frankfurter Rundschau*. 6 December 2011, sec. Magazin: 4. *LexisNexis*. Web. 30 Jan. 2016.

Nachkommenschaft aufzuwerten.”¹⁴⁹ The first sentence is reported speech—either Lohmark or the narrator is reporting what Tabea’s mother said. The sentence is mostly descriptive and non-evaluative until the final clause. The tone of “vor allem aber ihres” undermines the words themselves, indicating that Tabea is not at all a unique individual. Furthermore, Lohmark describes Tabea as a “Wolfskind” in her seating chart.¹⁵⁰ While the first part of the sentence could be attributed to either the narrator or Inge, with little shift in the meaning, the final clause is more attributable to Lohmark. The second sentence undeniably comes from her: “Was sie nicht sagte!” It contains her tone—shock, mockery and disdain for the single mother whose daughter has not fallen far from the tree. It is the third sentence that destabilizes a clear reading of the character Inge Lohmark and points to the ways in which the narrative itself provides alternate modes of reading the character. It is important that Inge is not the narrator of her own story because she lacks self-awareness. Embedded as she is in her perspective, Inge cannot understand her adult daughter’s motives for staying away, and she cannot see changes at the individual level.

Not only does Inge see patterns of inheritance within her students, she also finds herself trapped in patterns of behavior. I read Lohmark in the context of her relationships in order to point to how she *fits*, or more accurately, *does not fit* in her post-reunification environment. I place Lohmark in a constellation of relationships that add depth to our understanding of her character. Her interactions with Ellen and Erika are repeating and mirroring fragments of her (ideal) relationship with her adult daughter, Claudia, who, at the time of narration, lives in California. Through her relationship with her daughter and

¹⁴⁹ Schalansky, Judith. *Der Hals der Giraffe: Bildungsroman*. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011. Print. 107.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 20.

her two daughter substitutes, the narrative reveals Lohmark's longing to be a mother. This longing, however, does not actually make her capable of being a mother to Claudia.

During the German Democratic Republic, Lohmark had her daughter as a student in her classroom. She maintained a strict divide between herself as a teacher and as a mother, and this compartmentalization prohibited her from mothering her child in the classroom. This resulted in her non-intervention when her daughter was teased and bullied by the other students. However, it is not until the final pages of the novel that the reader comes to understand the full dysfunction of the mother-daughter relationship. After Claudia arrives late to class, she takes her seat, only to start screaming when Lohmark has her back turned. The details of the torment are not described, yet the effects are evident—Claudia's desk is a mess and her books are on the floor. Seeking comfort, Claudia runs to the front of the classroom in order to receive a hug from her mother; however, she is physically rejected by her mother.

In the narrative present, Ellen and Erika become substitute daughter figures. Ellen, perceived as the perpetual victim, is constantly bullied and excluded by her classmates. Acting in a similar manner as she did with her daughter, Lohmark does not intervene, and the outcome is the same—Ellen, like Claudia, does not in any way relate to or engage with Lohmark, and the two are separated. Claudia chose to leave the country, whereas, Inge is removed from Ellen's presence. These different effects indicate a change in context—temporal, societal (East-West), and pedagogical. Lohmark is confined to patterns of behavior, which she is unable to recognize. However, the evocation and destabilization of *Buildungsroman* and *Ankuftsroman*, demonstrate the insecurity and instability with which Lohmark experiences her everyday life. The reader is further able to recognize the ways in

which there is a constant flow of individual shifts and larger continuities within the East German-reunification-post-reunification timeline.

Reorientation of Heimat

The unnamed former East German town of the novel is located in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and exists in a state of suspended decay—after the changes wrought by German reunification but before it has been completely abandoned by people and history. Its inhabitants struggle to reorient themselves in the face of shifting political and economic landscapes, which also affect their notions of home and belonging. Ultimately, the novel constructs *Heimat* at the intersections of time and place across natural, historical, and biographical chronologies.

Historical time appears in the novel in the few references to Inge Lohmark's biography and in the narrative tension between *damals* and *jetzt*. *Damals* refers not only to her personal past but also to the region's historical-ideological context. Pieces of her biography are embedded into the narrative: she used to have pet snails, she really enjoyed gym class, and she used to spend her summers on her grandparent's farm. Both of her parents are thankfully dead, but the reader does not have access to why either Lohmark or the narrator associates the deaths with relief. *Damals* is locatable in any thought or event that occurred before the narrated present. Germany's Nazi past is briefly and casually evoked: Inge Lohmark remembers a physically disabled child from her neighborhood through the course of remembering her old biology book from the 1930s. It is unclear if these two memories emerge out of the same historical moment or if they have been superimposed on each other through the passage of time.

Damals is also locatable in the historical German Democratic Republic. Lohmark recalls the amount of information she used to have about her students: “Was ihre Eltern wohl machten? Früher hätte ein Blick ins Klassenbuch genügt. Intelligenzia, Angestellte, Arbeiter, Bauern. Offiziere zu den Arbeitern. Pastoren zur Intelligenzia.”¹⁵¹ On the one hand, this memory is one about the loss of institutional access and control over biographical information that occurred after German reunification. On the other hand, this memory hints at a longing to know a person within his or her context, regardless of how limited or limiting that context may be. For Lohmark also remembers as standard practice students received daily servings of milk and had access to calcium and fluoride tablets. She remembers this as an example of state care rather than control.

Jetzt is located specifically in the post-reunification economic and structural decay of the small town where the novel takes place. The temporal intersects with the spatial in the articulation of *hier*, which at times translates into *Heimat*:

Wer die Welt verstehen wollte, musste zu Hause damit anfangen. In der Heimat. Unsere Heimat. Von Kap Arkona bis zum Fichtelberg. Abhauen war ja keine Kunst. Das hatte sie immer den anderen überlassen. Es hatte nur eine ganz kurze Zeit gegeben, in der sie mit dem Gedanken spielte. Aber das war lange her. Sie war geblieben. Freiheit wurde überbewertet. Die Welt war entdeckt, die meisten Arten bestimmt. Man konnte getrost zu Hause bleiben.¹⁵²

Lohmark’s internal monologue shows one of the few moments when she actively identifies with a place. She expands this identification as “die Heimat” becomes “unsere Heimat.” For one brief moment, the narrative locates Inge Lohmark spatially—she is somewhere between Kap Arkona and Fichtelberg—and communally—she belongs with those who call this place home.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 23.

¹⁵² Ibid, 41-42.

However, Lohmark is difficult to locate temporally: “Man sah immer noch, dass man hier im Osten war. Man würde es noch in fünfzig Jahren sehen.”¹⁵³ The landscapes of the German Democratic Republic and the new federal states, if we, as Inge Lohmark does, disregard mining, coal-processing, and industrial pollution, have remained the same and identifiable via these natural landmarks, even though the political-national borders have shifted.¹⁵⁴ The boundaries of an East German *Heimat* are mapped out from north to south, from the ocean to the mountains.¹⁵⁵ According to this narrative mapping of place, regardless of the shifting meanings of *damals* and *jetzt*, *hier* is located in the former and enduring East.¹⁵⁶

Even as the East German homeland is reconstructed via the narrative, it is also destabilized by Inge Lohmark’s confession that she, too, once thought of leaving. The *hier* becomes definable by its opposite *drüben*. In comparison to *damals*, *jetzt*, *hier*, historical time, and cyclical time, *drüben* is the least developed concept in the narrative mapping of *Heimat*. For Inge, *drüben* remains the West—formally West Germany and currently either London or California—and is dependent on where her daughter is living at the time. In contrast to her daughter, who left eastern Germany as soon as she could, Inge Lohmark, through what she now articulates as choice, remained behind.

¹⁵³ Ibid, 206.

¹⁵⁴ There are also points in the narrative in which reunified Germany is evoked as the *Heimat*, for example when Inge Lohmark discusses the extinction of a native species of manatees or when the principal compares the emigration out of the new federal states to emigration out of the country from the *Ruhrgebiet*.

¹⁵⁵ Kap Arkona is located on the island Rügen, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern; and Fichtelberg is a well-known peak in Oberwiesenthal, Saxony.

¹⁵⁶ When asked if she identifies Vorpommern as her *Heimat*, Schlansky replied: “Ja. Das hat viel mit der Landschaft zu tun, mit der Weite, der Ostsee, Casper David Friedrich, Wolfgang Koeppen. Ich glaube an den Einfluss einer Region.” See: Schalansky, Judith. “Gewalt der Unbehausten; Judith Schalansky hat einen Roman über das Nachhallen der DDR in der Gegenwart geschrieben. Wie erklärt sie sich das Erstarken der Rechtsradikalen?” Interview by Jacques Schuster. *Die Welt*. 7 January 2012, sec. Literarische Welt: 2.

Reorientation of the Future: Museum or Natural Apocalypse?

Along with locating *Heimat* spatially and temporally, *Der Hals der Giraffe* further locates the German Democratic Republic within the realm of musealization. Using Inge Lohmark's museal gaze, the narrative links the decaying town in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern to a ghost town in California. This is also a reorientation of *Heimat*. As she waits for the bus after her car breaks down on the first day of school, Lohmark walks up a dirt path and takes in the view of the city. She notes the empty buildings and the decay. Lohmark's gaze traces the weathered buildings and the half renovated facades. It is difficult to tell if there is still life within the buildings. Caught between revitalization and extinction, Lohmark's hometown slowly approaches its demise. Even the people she observes are derelict—the narrative follows her gaze as she observes the two alcoholics standing in the town square. She also places negative value on what she sees because to her reunification was a defeat (*Kapitulation*).

Her observation of the landscape in front of her provides the frame for her memory of a trip to a ghost town in the Californian Mojave Desert. Her observation and her memory are linked by the use of “wie”: “Wie diese Geisterstadt in der Mojave-Wüste, die sie besichtigt hatten.”¹⁵⁷ Whereas she is alone as she overlooks her hometown, she was accompanied by her family in the ghost town. The narrative thus uses Lohmark's memory of the Californian ghost town as a future specter of what will become of her hometown. Even as Lohmark sees institutional musealization as a possible future, she advocates for the return of nature, which, for her, would be preferable.

¹⁵⁷ Schalansky, Judith. *Der Hals der Giraffe: Bildungsroman*. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011. Print. 62.

As she looks over the landscape, the first thing Lohmark does is remember the trip to the Mojave Desert in California. The trip occurred when she was still in touch with her daughter and the family visited a ghost town turned into an open air museal site that also includes a museum. The past seeps through this memory—the Californian gold rush and the musealization of the site. While there, Inge Lohmark disparages the commercialization and the musealization of the town—from the entrance fee they have to pay, to the signs describing daily life, to the embedded museum and souvenir stores.

The Californian ghost town turned museal site evokes a past and a mythos of Manifest Destiny and opportunity that is no longer, though it never really was, a reality in the United States. Inge Lohmark foresees the same process of commercialization and musealization in her small town in former East Germany. She is witnessing it becoming a ghost town and she condemns this process. According to her, no one would pay to visit “[eine] Stadt im vorpommerschen Hinterland, die außer dem Sitz der Kreisverwaltung nichts mehr zu bieten hatte.”¹⁵⁸ Lohmark’s critique of the museum betrays her ignorance of contemporary memory politics as well as her anxiety about the future of her place, a future that she can already see in the Californian past. Thus, she envisions an alternative in the form of a natural apocalypse.

Inge Lohmark, and the narrative alongside her, imagines nature’s return to the cultivated area: “Die meisten Gesetzmäßigkeiten waren erkannt, die Wälder gelichtet, die Pflanzen erzogen, die Tiere gezähmt. Ein einziges Freilichtmuseum. Wie geordnet doch alles war.”¹⁵⁹ Therefore, “Nicht der Verfall würde diesen Ort heimsuchen, sondern die totale Verwilderung. Eine wuchernde Eingemeindung, eine friedliche Revolution.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 64.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 216.

Blühende Landschaften.”¹⁶⁰ In evoking Helmut Kohl’s (unfulfillable) promise from 1990, the narrative uses cyclical time as a counter-narrative to dominant discourses of progress surrounding reunification. If reunification promised and continues to promise regional rejuvenation, then the only “flowering landscapes” Inge Lohmark, and by extension, the reader sees are projected into a future in which Nature has reclaimed her place.



Image Fourteen: *Der Hals der Giraffe*¹⁶¹

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 71.

¹⁶¹ Schalansky, Judith. *Der Hals der Giraffe: Bildungsroman*. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011. Print. 66-67.

The narrative description and visual representation of the imagined rampant return of nature slows down narrative time. It is not coincidental that Inge Lohmark's aerial mapping of home occurs at a *Haltestelle*. With her usual tongue-in-cheek extra-textual and self-referential manner, Judith Schalansky signals the reader to pause for a moment and take in a different kind of blooming landscape.¹⁶² Using Inge Lohmark's memorial gaze, which is simultaneously oriented toward the past and future, the narrative links a ghost town in California to a decaying town in the former East. Inge Lohmark's ongoing loss of her daughter is mirrored in the loss of her place, both geographical and social. The reader follows Inge's gaze as it passes over the broken down bus and the drunks in the town square—all of the human and material detritus left behind and left to nature.

The cyclical time of nature overwhelms the temporality of historical time in both *Blau steht dir nicht* and *Hals der Giraffe*. For Jenny, it is the coastline that provides her with the imagined freedom of gender and geographical mobility that she so desperately seeks. It is not until after the collapse of the German Democratic Republic that she is able to freely travel. However, the freedom she seeks is not yet truly obtainable. Though she eventually steps on to Oie, she is still haunted by the vanishing horizon of her childhood.

With her two novels, Judith Schalansky remembers the German Democratic Republic through a concentrated engagement with longer and broader literary and aesthetic traditions. Judith Schalansky's evocations of East Germany contain Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Ernst Haeckel, Jean-Baptiste Lamarck and Charles Darwin, National Socialism,

¹⁶² In a 1990 speech then German Chancellor Helmut Kohl promised that the new federal states would economically become "blooming landscapes." In his review of *Der Hals der Giraffe*, Gregor Keuschnig rightly makes the connection between the promises of reunification, the failure of reality to live up to those promises, and Schalansky's choice of image. Coupled with Inge Lohmark's misgivings about the future, the scene truly is "eine originelle Interpretation der "blühenden Landschaften"" Keuschnig, Gregor. "Bedürftige Literatur: Über Judith Schalanskys so genannten Bildungsroman *Der Hals der Giraffe*." *Glanz & Elend. Literatur und Zeitkritik*. Web. 7 Oct. 2014.

Soviet astronauts and scientists, East German overhead projectors and teaching methods, as well as a past that is primordial and a future that harkens the return of nature. Her unique approach to genre and materiality as well as her use of a museal gaze destabilizes how the German Democratic Republic is being remembered.

Chapter Three

The Materiality of Forgetting in Jenny Erpenbeck, Christa Wolf, and Angela Krauss

In this chapter I analyze Jenny Erpenbeck's novella *Geschichte vom alten Kind* (1999) and her short story "Im Halbschatten meines Schädels" (2001) alongside Angela Krauss' short story "Glashaus" (1987) and Christa Wolf's *Leibhaftig* (2002). Even though these authors come from different social and literary generations, they are biographically connected to the German Democratic Republic. Both Wolf and Krauss began publishing in the GDR and continued doing so after reunification; while Erpenbeck first published in 1999. Both *Leibhaftig* and "Glashaus" are set in the GDR, while *Geschichte vom alten Kind* and "Im Halbschatten meines Schädels" evoke the former East through allegory and memory. Moreover, these texts are enigmatic; they include dreams and fantasies, blurring the line between reality and imagination. They deftly negotiate remembering and forgetting via materiality in order to construct female subjectivity. In this chapter, I argue that in these diverse texts, the processes of forgetting, when linked to material objects, further creates conditions of possibility for female narrative agency.

Despite the narrative importance placed on remembering, the female narrators and protagonists often seek to forget. The main character in *Geschichte vom alten Kind*

expresses an intense longing to forget, while the novella demonstrates the impossibility of such a desire. In “Glashaus” the narrator finds a way to forget through fracturing her subjective self. In “Im Halbschatten meines Schädels” the imprisoned narrator insists on forgetting despite the multiple attempts her lover and his wife make to induce her to remember.

In all the narratives except for *Leibhaftig*, the dialectic between remembering and forgetting plays out along gender lines. The women desire to forget while the male interlocutors—the doctors in *Geschichte vom alten Kind*; the implied Stasi agent in “Glashaus”; and the lover in “Im Halbschatten meines Schädels”—demand that they remember. Thus, forgetting is often staged as resistance to these demands. In *Geschichte vom alten Kind*, the main character refuses to remember her age or her past, absolving herself of any connections beyond the orphanage. The narrator in “Glashaus” warily accommodates her visitor until she flees the compromised safety of her apartment, and the narrator in “Im Halbschatten meines Schädels” insists on forgetting, despite the harm it causes her.

Remembering and forgetting function differently in *Leibhaftig*. In *Leibhaftig*, the narrator utilizes the conditions of her hospitalization as an opportunity to remember her personal and political relationships. In Wolf’s novel, the narrator uses the conditions of her illness to remember her troubling friendship with Hannes Urban. Her memories are both personal and political because their relationship and his eventual suicide are linked to their individual negotiations with GDR state power.

Materiality plays an expansive role in all of these narratives. The objects encountered—the empty bucket, the beds, the writing desks, and the necklaces—are not

directly connected to the German Democratic Republic. However, their everyday, abstract, and universal significations are re-contextualized through personal memories as well as the narratives' historical or metaphorical restaging of the GDR. In *Geschichte vom alten Kind* the empty bucket, with which the main character is found, is remembered within the confines of the orphanage. Memory thus attributes metaphorical meaning to the material object. "Glashaus" was written and published in the GDR; therefore, the objects encountered in the apartment are by default East German. Similar to the everyday objects in Christa Wolf's *Was bleibt* (1979/1990), they recede into the background. However, the narrator in "Glashaus" makes particular note of her writing table and chair. Throughout the short story, she resists being made *dingfest*—both bound to the objects in her room and taken into custody by the state. While the writing desk is also noted in *Was bleibt*, it is the bed that is central to Wolf's novel *Leibhaftig*. The bed functions as the site of memory, illness, and recovery. Similarly, the beds encountered in Erpenbeck's *Geschichte vom alten Kind* and "Im Halbschatten meines Schädels" are sites of illness and security. Across all of these stories, materiality is linked to memory and narration.

Part I: Memory and Materiality in Jenny Erpenbeck's *Geschichte vom alten Kind* (1999)

Jenny Erpenbeck's debut, *Geschichte vom alten Kind*, opens with a fourteen-year-old girl standing in the street, holding an empty bucket. When questioned by the police, she is unable or unwilling to provide information about herself. Thus she is placed in an orphanage that also includes a school. Neither she nor the third person narrator reveal her name, and she is only referred to as *das Mädchen* or with the neutral pronoun *es*. While the location of the novella is never explicitly mentioned, at one point the school

commemorates the Allied firebombing of Dresden on February 13, 1945. It remains unclear when exactly after World War II the novella takes place or even how much time passes between the girl's arrival at the orphanage and her departure due to illness. Only the advent of Winter and Spring mark the passage of time.

The novella focuses on the girl's experiences at the orphanage. Initially she is bullied by her peers because of her weight and visible otherness. This complicates her assimilation into her new environment, which she articulates as her only goal. However, after her peers discover that she does not fight back or even react to their bullying, they begin to use her in their games—to pass notes or to keep watch while they engage in secret activities. The novella ends with the protagonist's hospitalization due to an inexplicable illness that also causes her to lose a significant amount of weight. Her thin body and the other features the doctors must have noticed reveal that the girl is in fact a woman in her thirties. The police are able to identify her, and her mother arrives to take her home. The narrative does not provide any information about the woman-child's past nor what it is that she is trying to forget. Furthermore, it is never known if she is intentionally forgetting or reacting to trauma when she attempts to return to the presumed security of childhood. Ultimately, *Geschichte vom alten Kind* is about the longing for a perfect moment of forgetting and the impossibility of such a longing.

In her analysis of *Geschichte vom alten Kind*, Nancy Nobile rightly notes that Erpenbeck invites the reader to examine the past and integrate it into the present.¹⁶³ Her focus is on reading *Geschichte vom alten Kind* as a novella. Erpenbeck's story is relatively short, has only one main character with no subplots, has a well-defined turning point, a

¹⁶³ Nobile, Nancy. "'So morgen wie heut': Time and Context in Jenny Erpenbeck's *Geschichte vom alten Kind*. *Gegenwartsliteratur*. 2. (2003): 283-310. Print.

Dingssymbol, and magical qualities. For Nobile, the genre of the novella is important because it is through genre analysis that she locates *Geschichte vom alten Kind* within German Romanticism, specifically *Der blonde Eckbert* by Ludwig Tieck (1797). Through this reading of Erpenbeck, Nobile does the work of elevating contemporary German literature above criticisms of superficiality and lack of aesthetic complexity.

The Kaspar Hauser story is a strong interlocutor in the novella. Kaspar Hauser was an early 19th century youth, who claimed to have been raised in isolation without being taught how to speak or write.¹⁶⁴ Along with the reference to Kaspar Hauser, the majority of critics who have reviewed *Geschichte vom alten Kind* focus on the theme of childhood, coupled with the woman-child's refusal to grow up, and the layers of authenticity behind the novella.¹⁶⁵ Erpenbeck's novella follows the basic plot structure of the Kaspar Hauser story—a young person is found and the authenticity of their lack of knowledge is questioned—but does not attempt to integrate the woman-child into larger society. Instead she is isolated within the microcosm of the orphanage.

¹⁶⁴ For more on the Kaspar Hauser connection see Poerschke, Ralf. Rev. of *Geschichte vom alten Kind* by Jenny Erpenbeck. *taz, die tageszeitung*. 27 Jan. 2000. *LexisNexis*. Web. 6. May 2015. and Erpenbeck, Jenny. Interview by Jan Brandt. "In der Verjüngungsmaschine." *SpiegelOnline*. 6 March 2005. Web. 6 May 2011.

¹⁶⁵ For the role of childhood see: Gansel, Carsten. ">>Als Kind liebt man, was man kennt<< - Kindheit erinnern und erzählen bei Jenny Erpenbeck." *Wahrheit und Täuschung: Beiträge zum Werk Jenny Erpenbecks*. Ed Friedhalm Marx and Julia Schöll. Göttingen: Wallstein, 2014. 79-95. Print.; Schreiber, Mathias. Rev. of *Geschichte vom alten Kind* by Jenny Erpenbeck. *Der Spiegel*. 11 Oct. 1999. *LexisNexis*. Web. 21. May 2015. Markus Schwahl reads the main character's return to childhood as a pathological refusal to grow up. See: Schwahl, Markus. *Die Ästhetik des Stillstands: Anti-entwicklungstexte im Literaturunterricht*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Verlag, 2010. Print.; and Vedder, Björn. "Jenny Erpenbeck." *Kritisches Lexikon zur deutschsprachigen Gegenwartsliteratur*. Web. 15 June 2012. Jenny Erpenbeck's grandmother Hedda Zinner corresponded with a woman purporting to be a fourteen year old girl. The correspondent was revealed as a middle aged woman when Zinner visited the girl/woman in the hospital. This moment of discovery is reproduced in Erpenbeck's story. When writing this novella, Erpenbeck herself posed as a seventeen year old high school student in order to experience the return to adolescence. See: Dennehy, Tobias. "Jenny Erpenbecks nüchterne und anstrengende *Geschichte vom alten Kind*." in *literaturkritik.de*. 2. February 2000. Friedhelm Marx takes a different approach and examines the relationship between identity and language in both *Geschichte vom alten Kind* and *Wörterbuch*: Marx, Friedhelm. "Geschlossene Gesellschaften, offene Texte. Jenny Erpenbecks *Geschichte vom alten Kind* und *Wörterbuch*." *Wahrheit und Täuschung: Beiträge zum Werk Jenny Erpenbecks*. Ed Friedhalm Marx and Julia Schöll. Göttingen: Wallstein, 2014. 97-109. Print.

The girl navigates the social hierarchy of the orphanage and school by refusing to learn and also by mimicking the other students' words and gestures. In the first instance she refuses to remember, even if what she is being asked to remember could be accomplished through rote memorization, and in the second instance, she wants to remember, yet does so imperfectly. After observing her classmates and teachers, the girl becomes determined to assume the lowest position in the social hierarchy because it is the one that does not need to be defended. It is through this self-degradation that she creates a place for herself in her new environment. In contrast to Inge Lohmark's daughter in Judith Schalansky's *Der Hals der Giraffe* (2011), Jenny Erpenbeck's protagonist integrates herself into the violent school environment.

In order to reach the lowest position, the girl does not react to being bullied, and she manipulates her teachers into humiliating her in class. In the school cafeteria, she shovels food into her mouth: "die Knochen abnagen, die Soße ablecken, die Puddingnapfe mit dem Finger ausputzen..."¹⁶⁶ She ignores her classmates' taunts and even eats their leftovers. Her classmates are united in their reactions of disgust, and through their disgust she becomes visible to them: "Sonst eher farblos bis an die Grenze der Unsichtbarkeit, verleiht die Konzentration, die es auf das Essen wendet, ihm einen Anschein von Charakter."¹⁶⁷ However, it is only after she holds stolen money for a classmate that she is included in their daily lives. Her integration into her peer community is mirrored by a turning point in her relationship to learning and remembering. She begins to remember her classmates' names and is able to differentiate among them.

¹⁶⁶ Erpenbeck, Jenny. *Geschichte vom alten Kind*. Berlin: Eichborn, 1999. Print. 54.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 54-55.

At the same time that she is ingratiating herself with her peers, she is distancing herself from her teachers and the knowledge they are attempting to impart. In math class she purposefully gives the incorrect answer to an easy question, and in English class she constantly asks for clarification. Her presumed stupidity ensures that her teachers disregard her in class:

Alles, was ihm hier geschehen kann, wenn solche Vorkommnisse sich häufen, ist, daß der Lehrer es irgendwann aufgeben wird, daß er nicht umhin können wird zu bemerken, daß die Fähigkeit des Mädchens, zu vergessen, größer ist als seine Fähigkeit, den Lernstoff einer achten Klasse, zum Beispiel in Mathematik, in seinem Kopf aufzubewahren, um mit diesem Kopf dann planmäßig in eine neunte Klasse fortzuschreiten.¹⁶⁸

Her hope is that the teachers will eventually give up attempting to turn the eighth grade girl into a ninth grader. In her refusal to learn, the girl attempts to halt the progression of time as outlined by school years. She further challenges the notion that learning for school means learning for life. However, she is not successful in slowing down time, and her impersonation of a child is eventually revealed.

It is interesting that the girl's manipulation of her teachers is in reference to her ability to forget. The introduction of forgetting as a possibility for subjective agency indicates that the novella is not merely operating at the level of school dynamics but is also working through larger questions of remembering and forgetting. The girl does not remember her life before she arrived at the empty street holding the empty bucket, and her memory appears to begin with the moment the police find her. When she references the past, it is always within the temporal frame of the novella. Her forgetting is linked to the empty, unformed nature of her body and personality. It is also never clear if her lack of memory is intentionally deceptive or a side effect of illness or trauma. Friedhelm Marx and

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, 20.

Julia Schöll note that the protagonist “bleibt sich selbst ein Rätsel, es täuscht sich selbst ebenso wie die anderen.”¹⁶⁹

The third person narrator focalizes the narration through the woman-child’s perspectives. This maintains a critical distance between the reader and the protagonist. The novella uses a first person narrator, who is the woman-child, only four times. However, the first person narration only contributes to the ambiguity of the story. The moments when the protagonist speaks for herself are underscored by her insecurity and her inability to distinguish dream from memory or reality from fantasy.

As she attempts to reach the lowest position on the social hierarchy, she refers to herself as the weakest of the children: “Ich bin das Schwächste. Keines von den Findlingen, die mich umgeben, ist schwächer als ich.”¹⁷⁰ However, her classmates do not initially allow her to occupy that position undisturbed. When she is physically taunted and sexually harassed by her classmates, she marvels at their child-like features: “Diese schönen Kinder, mit ihrer Kinderhaut, mit ihren Kinderzähnen, mit ihren Armbänderchen—sie schlagen das Tor vor mir zu.”¹⁷¹ Even as they abuse her, she cannot help but marvel at their beautiful youth and authenticity. She is unable to accurately interpret her environment, but that does not prevent her from constantly attempting to fit in. Furthermore, she is unable to distinguish dream from reality:

Die Schulträume kommen wieder. Träume von Umkleideräumen, von überschwemmten Massentoiletten, von Schwimmhallen, in denen mir Haare in den Mund schwimmen. Auf- und zuschlagende Türen, ich merke plötzlich, daß mich jemand beobachtet, jemand glotzt über eine der halbhohen Pappwände, während ich neben das Becken pisse. Die Farben: Mintgrün und Weiß.

¹⁶⁹ Marx, Friedhelm and Julia Schöll. “Wahrheit und Täuschung. Eine Einleitung.” *Wahrheit und Täuschung: Beiträge zum Werk Jenny Erpenbecks*. Ed Friedhelm Marx and Julia Schöll. Göttingen: Wallstein, 2014. 7-14. Print. 8.

¹⁷⁰ Erpenbeck, Jenny. *Geschichte vom alten Kind*. Berlin: Eichborn, 1999. Print. 24.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid*, 106. 28.

The phrasing “school dreams” is ambiguous. It could either mean that they are dreams she has about school or that they are how she dreams of fitting in—with the other girls in the locker room, the restroom, and the pool. The scenarios she describes are also common references to youth and sport culture in the German Democratic Republic; hence, they could be memories of the protagonist’s life before the orphanage. She could unwillingly be remembering the group toilets of the GDR or the collective, communal activities around sports.

The final moment when the woman-child speaks for herself blurs the line between reality and fantasy:

Das Gewicht meines Lebens nimmt zu. Über mir errichte ich einen prächtigen Palast. Mein Palast ist aus Stroh. Er steht auf einem Hühnerfuß, das Huhn habe ich selber geschlachtet. Bei Gewitter hört man noch, wie es schreit. Ich schmücke meinen Palast. Er wird ein prächtiges Feuer abgeben.¹⁷²

In a close reading of her own writing, Jenny Erpenbeck notes that she wrote the palace in the woman-child’s memory as a reference to Baba Jaga’s house, a witch figure in Russian and Eastern European stories especially familiar to those who grew up in the GDR. She further emphasizes the aural connection between the burning palace of straw and the sound of a leaf falling from a chestnut tree mentioned in the previous paragraph. For Erpenbeck, it is the gaps between paragraphs that are important. They allow the girl to associate her body with the fantastical realm of the novella.¹⁷³ What I notice in the woman-child’s statement is the fragility of what she describes. The palace that she imagines is made of straw and she further imagines it at the center of a magnificent fire. She describes this

¹⁷² Ibid, 42.

¹⁷³ Erpenbeck, Jenny. “Über das Erzählen und das Verschweigen. Bamberger Poetik-Vorlesung.” *Wahrheit und Täuschung: Beiträge zum Werk Jenny Erpenbecks*. Ed Friedhalm Marx and Julia Schöll. Göttingen: Wallstein, 2014. 15-35. Print. 30-31.

destruction in the same time that she mentions the heavy weight of her life. This is a reference to a past she does not (care to) remember, and it is also a reference to the literal weight her body carries with her as part of her child disguise.

All of the moments when the woman-child uses the first person “I” occur early in the novella. It is as if the protagonist loses her (past) self as she integrates herself into her new environment. The woman-child continues to forget even when she is confronted with her biological mother. After she is hospitalized and her true identity is revealed, her mother comes to visit her. While at the orphanage, the woman-child had been writing letters to herself and signing them *deine Mama*. Having effectively taken on the role of her own mother, the protagonist rejects the woman who has come to assume that role: “Ach, du bist meine Mutter, sagt die, welche das Mädchen gewesen war, und öffnet sehr langsam die Augen, ich kann mich gar nicht an dich erinnern.”¹⁷⁴ Even when faced with her mother, the protagonist is unwilling or unable to remember, and the novella ends with forgetting.

The dynamic between remembering and forgetting is also realized through the woman-child’s interactions with the empty bucket. The bucket itself appears only once in the novella, at the beginning. It is almost immediately taken from her. Thereafter, it returns as a remembered object. Moreover, the police officer’s comment “Alles im Eimer, was”¹⁷⁵ haunts the girl. It becomes evident that she herself is an empty vessel. What is not encompassed by the officer’s intended insult, however, is the protagonist’s longing for and agency in her own emptiness.

¹⁷⁴ Erpenbeck, Jenny. *Geschichte vom alten Kind*. Berlin: Eichborn, 1999. Print. 106.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 7.

When the girl does remember the bucket, it is to emphasize the desirability of her place in the orphanage.¹⁷⁶ She first remembers the bucket as she prepares for her new life: “Einen Moment lang muß es an seinen Eimer denken, der beim Hin-und Herschaukeln immer einen leisen Klagelaut von sich gegeben hat.”¹⁷⁷ She leaves the bucket behind in order to become a part of the orphanage. The protagonist also reminds herself of the bucket in order to justify her lack of envy when some of the children explore the town or visit their families on the weekend: “denn es weiß ja, wie es draußen zugeht: Man steht mit einem leeren Eimer auf einer Geschäftsstraße und wartet.”¹⁷⁸

Rather than engage with her classmates outside of the orphanage, where there is nothing waiting for her, the protagonist models herself into the perfect receptacle for their histories, stories, and secrets. Because she has no history of her own and no expectations, it is as if they are revealing themselves to no one: “denn es hat keine eigenen Geschichten....sie hätten ihre Geheimnisse niemandem erzählt, wenn sie sie dem Mädchen erzählt haben.”¹⁷⁹ And in this way she makes herself a vessel for their stories.

Simultaneously, she bases her imitation of a fourteen year old girl on their experiences:

“Sein Kopf hört auf, leer zu sein, er wird ein Kopf voll Geschichten einer

Vierzehnjährigen.”¹⁸⁰ In fact, the girl welcomes being treated like an object in the room:

Wenn am Samstagnachmittag seine Zimmerkameradinnen ohne ein Wort des Abschieds das Zimmer verlassen, als existierte das Mädchen für sie überhaupt nicht, so bedeutet dies die wahrhaftigste Anerkennung des Mädchens als

¹⁷⁶ For alternate readings of the bucket see Nobile, Nancy. “‘So morgen wie heut’: Time and Context in Jenny Erpenbeck’s *Geschichte vom alten Kind*. *Gegenwartsliteratur*. 2. (2003): 283-310. Print. and Schöll, Julia. “Wörter und Dinge. Text-und Objektästhetik bei Jenny Erpenbeck.” Internationales Forschungskolloquium mit Jenny Erpenbeck. Otto Friedrich Universität Bamberg. Germany. 20 June 2013. Conference Presentation.

¹⁷⁷ Erpenbeck, Jenny. *Geschichte vom alten Kind*. Berlin: Eichborn, 1999. Print. 12.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 80.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 77.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 63.

ihresgleichen. Es bedeutet, daß sie sicher sind, das Mädchen wieder vorzufinden, wenn sie zurückkommen, es bedeutet, daß das Mädchen ganz selbstverständlich zum Inventar gehört, wie Spind und Bett.¹⁸¹

The girl reads their indifference as acknowledgment and acceptance and as a sign that she has become an expected thing in their lives.

The girl finds comfort in her own (material) objectification. She accomplishes this through her alignment with empty vessels and objects in a room. The bucket is the only tangible connection she has to her past. As such, it represents the woman's transformation into a girl, yet it also reveals the incompleteness of the transformation. The woman has missed the mark in choosing a prop of childhood as the object for her adolescent transformation. The revelation that that girl is actually a woman also indicates that the woman-child does not have an empty past but rather an overabundance of past. Even though the woman-child longed for security and innocence, the narrative itself precludes such a possibility. The orphanage is not necessarily a safe place, nor do the rules remain constant—forcing the presumed child to negotiate complex social and power dynamics with other children and the instructors. The novella's ending is caught in a moment of forgetting, and it unclear what will become of the woman-child after she leaves the hospital.

Part II: *Dingfest machen*: The Dissolution of Self in “Glashaus” by Angela Krauss (1987)

Written two years before the end of the GDR, Angela Krauss' short story narrates one afternoon during which a woman is confronted by her past in the form of a male visitor. The woman awakens and looks out the window. Amidst the ongoing construction,

¹⁸¹ Ibid, 74.

she experiences a moment of stillness: “Jetzt ist es einen Augenblick lang still.”¹⁸² From her sixth story window she watches not only the ongoing street construction, more aptly described as destruction, but also the people passing by. This scene of observation and the narrator’s detachment from movement is repeated throughout the opening pages of the story, contributing to the sense of timelessness that the narrative evokes overall. Memories also intrude into the narrator’s observations, allowing for a comparison of the past and the present in which time collapses upon itself. It is from this unique temporal space that the narrator leaves her apartment and enters the street. Her movement towards the outside breaks the timelessness of her observations and precipitates the crisis of the narrative—she is recognized and followed back by a man from her past. The narrator alternately describes the man as an intruder and guest.

Similar to Erpenbeck’s *Geschichte vom alten Kind*, the reader is never really afforded a clear sense of time and place in “Glashaus.” All is narrated in the past tense, with multiple pasts in play. The man, whom the narrator may or may not know from her childhood, enters her apartment unexpectedly. He seems to know a lot about her, whereas she does not know or does not remember his name: “Ich erinnere mich nicht.”¹⁸³ The imbalance of information, as well as his familiarity with her apartment, indicates that he may be a *Stasi* agent. However, she may also be denying knowledge of their association as a way of repressing her former complicity with the *Stasi*. Though the man references their childhood and adolescence, the woman does not know if it has been ten years or as few as eight days since the last time they saw each other.

¹⁸² Krauss, Angela. “Glashaus.” *Glashaus*. Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1988. (1987) 168-186. Print. 168.

¹⁸³ *Ibid*, 176.

On the one hand, the antagonism between the man and the woman evokes the genre of crime fiction. The man is described as a stereotypical villain, and the reader is prompted to sympathize with the woman. The man's reentrance into her life is portrayed as a violent intrusion: "Er muß sich mit Gewalt hineindrängen."¹⁸⁴ He surveys her home: "Recht frei blickt er auch in meinem Zimmer umher, das mir so vertraut ist wie meine Haut."¹⁸⁵ His presence shifts the atmosphere in her small apartment. While the two engage in the motions of a welcome visit—she offers him drinks and they catch up about the past—she is fully aware of his intrusion. Even the room does not welcome him: "Die Atmosphäre des Allerpersönlichsten ist hier in diesem Raum so dicht, daß für ein anderes Bewußtsein kein freier Fleck bleibt."¹⁸⁶ Yet, he is already inside.

On the other hand, this short story is about memory. The conflict between remembering and forgetting is enacted by the two characters—the narrator who seeks to forget and the male intruder who implores her to remember. It is unclear what exactly he wishes for her to remember. He calls them comrades, though he concedes that she was "kein guter Kamerad...du warst abwesend."¹⁸⁷ He implores her to remember their collective past and hints that she may not have been a committed comrade. He also indicates that he is there to explain his actions either in regards to his earlier political enthusiasm or to when he sexually assaulted her, a scene that is ambiguously narrated. With his confession, state power intersects with personal memory in order to further undermine the female narrator's feelings of safety within her own apartment. Thus memory is presented as intrusive and dangerous.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid, 173-174.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, 175.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid, 173-174.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, 181.

The narrator's precarious situation is heightened by the man's constant attempts to hold on to her. He first reminds her of the times she slipped out of his grasp: "wenn ich nach dir greifen wollte, griff ich ins Leere."¹⁸⁸ Intended as a threat, his complaint also foreshadows the narrator's escape at the end of the story. He then gazes proprietarily over her, her apartment, and the things in her apartment. He expresses pleasure in being able to make her *dingfest*:

Es handele sich bei seinem Gefallen vor allem um die Genugtuung, mich tatsächlich an einem *Ort* vorzufinden, mich gewissermaßen *dingfest* zu machen und alle anderen zu mir gehörigen Dinge auch. Dabei schaut er wieder über die papierne Landschaft meines täglichen Lebens...¹⁸⁹

While his initial pleasure could be superficially explained by his reunion with a childhood friend, there is a sinister undertone to his presence in her apartment. *Dingfest machen* usually indicates placing someone under arrest. However, because the man may or may not be an agent of the state, it is unclear if he is visiting the narrator in an official capacity. However, it is clear that he is assuming a position of power and ownership vis-a-vis the narrator, the papers and objects that comprise her everyday life, and her living environment. It is as if he has come to remind her of her subordinate place in her own life.

He concludes his reminiscing with a story about a glass milk bottle breaking in her hands. He grabs her hands and looks at the palms, as if searching for a physical trace of what he remembers. She does not respond to him, but rather flees to the street. It is unclear if her flight is imagined or remembered because she describes it as cyclical, almost timeless: "[j]edesmal, wenn ich für kurze Zeit aus meinem Zimmer herunter steige und ins Freie trete..."¹⁹⁰ This moment of impossibility creates a self that splinters into

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, 181.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, 177.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, 185.

simultaneously being both inside (being acted upon by the man and memories) and outside (acting on her own, free of memory, (re)capturing timelessness).¹⁹¹ From the outside she looks in:

Kaum habe ich mich ein Stück entfernt, kann ich weit oben mein Fenster erkennen. Es kommt mir ganz und gar fremd vor aus dieser Perspektive. Es weckt keinerlei Erinnerungen in mir. Ich frage mich nicht einmal, was dort oben in diesem Augenblick hinter dem dicht schließenden Fensterglas geschieht. Der Ausgang dieser Schlacht ist mir nicht bekannt.¹⁹²

From the outside position, she cannot remember or recognize her apartment. Furthermore, she herself does not know the outcome of the battle between remembering and forgetting that is taking place in her apartment. This final move can be read as a sort of amnesia, a willful disappearing of the self and an absolution of remembering.

Part III: Confined to the GDR: Materiality and Memory

Of the narratives discussed in this chapter, “Glashaus” is the only one that was written and published in the German Democratic Republic. In the following section, I focus on the function and meaning of writing desks and chairs in “Glashaus” as well as in Christa Wolf’s *Was bleibt* (1979/1990) before discussing the role of the bed in *Leibhaftig* (2002) in order to begin to work through how Jenny Erpenbeck uses beds in her novella *Geschichte vom alten Kind* and short story “Im Halbschatten meines Schädels.”

The male visitor in “Glashaus” asserts his presence in the narrator’s apartment by occupying the chair that is most precious to her—the one next to the writing desk—even though there are other options available:

[Er] geht geradeswegs auf den einzigen großen Stuhl in meinem Zimmer zu und setzt sich darauf.... Das persönlichste, ja das intimste Möbelstück aber ist mein

¹⁹¹ The narrator’s splintering of self in many ways mirrors the narrator’s dissolution in Ingeborg Bachmann’s *Malina* (1971). While sharing a feminist prerogative, these two texts are ultimately very different.

¹⁹² Krauss, Angela. “Glashaus.” *Glashaus*. Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1988. (1987) 168-186. Print. 185-186.

großer Schreibstuhl. Daß das mein unverhoffter Gast in dem Augenblick erfüllte, als er in mein kleines Zimmer eintrat, das möchte ich ihm jetzt mit Unbefangenheit vergelten.¹⁹³

Furthermore, the chair gives the visitor a power that the narrator herself has perhaps not felt:

Mein großer Stuhl verleiht jedem Menschen, den er aufnimmt, eine Würde, indem er ihn in einer Haltung stützt, die ein Mensch aus sich heraus nicht lange aufrechterhalten kann. Diese Haltung leitet augenblicklich ein inneres Sammeln ein; es ist, als flösse alles richtungslos in uns Kreisende auf einmal in ein einziges Gefäß, über dessen Existenz wir so oft in Zweifel geraten; aber es gibt es! Ja, es gibt es.¹⁹⁴

The narrator describes her chair in an intimate and distancing manner. It is as if she has observed the power of the chair—the worth and composure it grants a person as well as the calming effect it can have. In this moment, power is stripped of gender and attributed to a specific position and comportment within a space and in relation to an object. It is unclear if the narrator is calling upon universal or external understandings of the power of writing, or if she is the one who has imbued the chair and writing desk with this power.

Similarly, the narrator in Christa Wolf's *Was bleibt* (1979/1990) locates her power in the writing desk. It is from there that she seeks to develop a new language. She arrives at her desk after cleaning up after breakfast. However, the desk is also the site from which she envisions being interrogated by the Stasi: "Einmal würde ich in einem Zimmer sitzen—ich stellte es mir klar vor, ein normales Bürozimmer—, und man würde mir Fragen stellen."¹⁹⁵ There is a double meaning attached to her association of *Schreibtisch* with *Foltertisch*.¹⁹⁶ Writing can metaphorically be a torturous endeavor, but in the German

¹⁹³ Ibid, 174.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, 175.

¹⁹⁵ Wolf, Christa. *Was Bleibt: Erzählung*. Frankfurt am Main: Luchterhand Literaturverlag, 1990. (June-July 1979/November 1989). Print. 66.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, 71.

Democratic Republic, it could have also resulted in actual torture. Thus, the desk, like the *Schreibstuhl* in “Glashaus” is a site of power and danger.

In the narratives by Christa Wolf and Jenny Erpenbeck, the bed is in many ways analogous to the desk in “Glashaus.” The bed is both the safest and most dangerous site for narrating female subjectivity. While traditionally a domestic object, the bed is also a powerful site in Erpenbeck’s stories.

The narrator in Christa Wolf’s *Was bleibt* finds in bed a respite from the constant surveillance she experiences: “Ruhig auf dem Rücken liegen, die Augen schließen, atmen. Atmen. Ich atme. Ich denke nicht. Ich bin ruhig.”¹⁹⁷ In an almost meditative state she is able to pause her thinking and simply be. Wolf continues to explore the dimensions of the bed in her post-reunification novel *Leibhaftig* (2002). *Leibhaftig* tells the story of a woman hospitalized in East Germany. While her doctors do everything in their power, including smuggling medicine from West Germany, to help her, she remembers, dreams, and hallucinates. It is from her imprisoned position in the bed that the story unravels. The first person narrator often reverts to narrating in the third person. The rapid and sometimes incoherent shift in narrative voice mirrors her experiences in and out of consciousness, the return of pain, and the inexplicability of language.

Leibhaftig begins with pain—the first word is *Verletzt*, a sentence and paragraph in its own right. At stake is not only the health of the physical body but also that of the political body. Not only does the doctor use the language of construction when detailing her treatment plan (“Wir müssen Sie erst allmählich wieder aufbauen.”¹⁹⁸ She must be

¹⁹⁷ Ibid, 68-69.

¹⁹⁸ Wolf, Christa. *Leibhaftig*. München: Luchterhand, 2002. Print. 22.

(re)built.), but the narrator repeatedly calls her body an allegory (*Gleichnis*). Unclear, however, is if the political body is that of the GDR or of reunified Germany. This question remains unanswered because her physical pain continually halts narration:

Ja, ich bin wach, ja, ich habe Schmerzen, nein, unerträglich sind sie nicht—aber erzählen läßt sich nichts ohne Zeit. Das Erzählen habe ich aufgeben, zugleich mit dem Wissen, Fragen, Urteilen, mit dem Behaupten, Lehren und Verstehen, dem Begründen, Folgern, und Entdecken, mit dem Messen, Vergleichen und Handeln.¹⁹⁹

All knowledge, judgments, understanding, and imagining are trapped within the boundaries of pain.

While pain does not halt memory, it does confuse the situation. In one instance, the narrator attempts to get out of bed only to discover that she has been tied down: “Zu allererst müßte ich meinen linken Arm freibekommen, den sie mir irgendwo festgebunden haben, ich ziehe und zerze...”²⁰⁰ She pulls and pulls until she hurts herself and begins bleeding from her freshly opened wounds. The nurses and doctors rush in and admonish her not to move. She had been attempting to leave to find her friend Urban, only to discover that the bed was trapping her in order to help her safely recover from surgery.

Memory, like the narrator’s body, is both personal and political. From the confines of her hospital bed, the narrator remembers her friendship with Hannes Urban. She reaches further back into her familial memory and remembers her Aunt Lisbeth, who married a Jewish doctor during the Third Reich. Embedded in the personal memories of the German Democratic Republic is the imperative to not forget the horrors of the Third Reich. While her personal memory ends with tragedy—Urban’s suicide—it is unclear what will become of political memory. Even though *Leibhaftig* takes place in the German Democratic

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, 70.

²⁰⁰ Ibid, 124.

Republic, there are few temporal markers that make clear that this is a pre-reunification story. The melancholic air surrounding the narrator as well as her struggle to reorient herself evoke themes of both East German *Aufbau* literature and *Wende* literature. At one point the narrator asks: “Bin ich angekommen... Will ich ankommen?”²⁰¹ The question of arrival was paramount in 1950s East German culture, society, and literature. It is also relevant post-reunification: Have former East Germans arrived in the reunified state? However, within the post-reunification context, authors such as Wolf, who wrote through reunification and fought for reformed socialism, must ask themselves after the unequivocal collapse of socialism in the new millennium: Do they even want to arrive?

Angela Krauss’ story “Glashaus” was written and published at a time when German reunification was unimaginable, yet it shares with Christa Wolf’s *Was bleibt* and *Leibhaftig* the precarity of female subjectivity. The protagonists in these stories seek to narrate through the danger of the writing desk or bed. Similarly, the woman-child in Jenny Erpenbeck’s *Geschichte vom alten Kind* narrates, remembers, and forgets from a precarious position. The woman-child in *Geschichte vom alten Kind* is confined to a bed twice in the novella. The first time is in the school infirmary for a minor illness, the second in a local hospital for an inexplicable illness. During both of these confinements, she exists outside of the social order, which she experiences as both shameful and liberating.

In the school infirmary she finds rest in her isolation. The bed is a peaceful place where she does not have to perform anything other than the role of patient: “Gegen das Bett, zumal dagegen, förmlich an es gefesselt zu sein, hat das Mädchen nichts, wie gesagt, das Bett ist zweifellos der sicherste Platz auf der Welt, und überdies einer der

²⁰¹ Ibid, 179.

wärmsten.”²⁰² This peace is only disrupted by the knowledge that her illness has taken her out of

the flow of everyday life. Similarly, her experience in the hospital is fraught with a feeling of being outside of everyday life. She begins to imagine her days as if she were still in school. Thus, the rhythm of the school day frames her time in the hospital:

Aus der Zeit geworfen liegt das Mädchen im Krankenbett, aber es erinnert sich genau an das Gesicht, das jeder Wochentage besessen hatte. Eine tiefe, pünktliche Erinnerung bewahrt es über den Stundenplan jedes einzelnen Wochentages in sich auf, pünktlich fühlt es die Gefühle, die es an jedem dieser Tage, als es noch zur Schule ginge, gefühlt hat, und hält so die Verbindung zu seinen kleinen Freunden.²⁰³

Not only does she imagine being in English or Chemistry on the appropriate days and times, but she also evokes the requisite feelings that she would have been feeling had she been there. This allows her to temporarily forget that she is in a hospital outside of the orphanage. This allows her to forget that her mother has arrived to take her home. This allows her to forget that she is not a child. However, the ending leaves it unclear if the woman-child remembers that she is an adult.

Part IV: Confined to the GDR: Allegory and Jenny Erpenbeck’s “Im Halbschatten meines Schädels” (2001)

Across these narratives, the bed and the sites associated with writing evoke comfort and safety as well as uncertainty and danger. These stories all have a claustrophobic feel to them—the enclosed orphanage in *Geschichte vom alten Kind*, the studio apartment in “Glashaus,” the hospital beds in *Geschichte vom alten Kind* and *Leibhaftig*, and the room

²⁰² Erpenbeck, Jenny. *Geschichte vom alten Kind*. Berlin: Eichborn, 1999. Print. 52.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 96-97.

in “Im Halbschatten meines Schädels.” The narratives cautiously allow the reader to access how these women act in the confined spaces.

The stories discussed in this chapter are about the GDR. “Glashaus” was written and published in 1987 and, despite its temporal ambiguity, *Leibhaftig* also takes place in the GDR, while divided Berlin provides the geographical landscape for the narrator’s dreams. However, it is less obvious how Erpenbeck’s *Geschichte vom alten Kind* and “Im Halbschatten meines Schädels” reference the German Democratic Republic. Erpenbeck’s novella and short story work through multiple levels of memory discourse about the GDR—ranging from *ostalgic* childhood memories of safety to the oppressive nature of state control and surveillance.

The German Democratic Republic is most obviously encountered in Jenny Erpenbeck’s collection *Dinge, die verschwinden* (2009), which is fundamentally about the material and immaterial objects that are disappearing from her life. It further provides the setting for sections of *Heimsuchung* (2008) and *Aller Tage Abend* (2012). The relationship between the individual and a system of oppression is explicit in *Wörterbuch* (2004). Even though the dictatorship in question remains unnamed, there are similarities to the GDR.²⁰⁴

Along with multiple scholars and critics, I read the orphanage in *Geschichte vom alten Kind* as an allegorical site for the GDR, which in turn marks the novella as a partial allegory. Jenny Erpenbeck supports this reading. Wiebke Eden recalls in her interview with Erpenbeck:

²⁰⁴ See Mein, Georg. “Erzählen und Erinnerung im Werk Jenny Erpenbecks.” *Wahrheit und Täuschung: Beiträge zum Werk Jenny Erpenbecks*. Ed Friedhalm Marx and Julia Schöll. Göttingen: Wallstein, 2014. 67-78. Print. and Marx, Friedhelm. “Geschlossene Gesellschaften, offene Texte. Jenny Erpenbecks *Geschichte vom alten Kind* und *Wörterbuch*.” *Wahrheit und Täuschung: Beiträge zum Werk Jenny Erpenbecks*. Ed Friedhalm Marx and Julia Schöll. Göttingen: Wallstein, 2014. 97-109. Print.

Die *Geschichte vom alten Kind* greift vielerlei Motive auf...Nicht zuletzt lässt sich die Geschichte als politische Parabel lesen, das Heim vielleicht als Symbol der DDR verstehen, als Symbol der sozialistischen Kollektivität und Abschottung. 'Ich habe schon den Vergleich mit der DDR im Kopf gehabt', bestätigt Jenny Erpenbeck, 'das passiert automatisch, wenn man ein geschlossenes System mit einem offenen vergleicht.' Der Niedergang der DDR bedeutete für sie einen radikalen Umbruch, der sie bis heute persönlich und damit auch literarisch beeinflusst.²⁰⁵

Scholars Nancy Nobile and Katie Jones also work through the allegorical role of the German Democratic Republic in *Geschichte vom alten Kind*. For Nobile, the confined space of the orphanage is sufficient in evoking the GDR. Similarly, Jones notes that the borders of the orphanage when coupled with the woman-child's affiliation with the home's authoritarian structure and her own need for clear social boundaries sufficiently evoke the oppressive nature of the German Democratic Republic.²⁰⁶ Jones goes on to read the woman-child's amorphous body as allegorical. Unwilling or unable to change her body, the protagonist uses disgust to protect its boundaries. However, according to Jones, Erpenbeck ultimately reduces the girl to a stereotype of the disgusting, unruly woman, a representation that does not sufficiently challenge misogynistic, cultural constructions of female sexuality.²⁰⁷

In reading the orphanage from *Geschichte vom alten Kind* as an allegorical site for the German Democratic Republic, I am able to better comment on how the novella engages discourses of GDR memory. In an underdeveloped aspect of her analysis of *Geschichte vom alten Kind*, Jones indicates that the novella also addresses post-reunification issues,

²⁰⁵ Erpenbeck, Jenny. Interview by Wiebke Eden. "Sich mit Worten auszudrücken, war immer das Nächste." *Keine Angst vor grossen Gefühlen: Die neuen Schriftstellerinnen*. Berlin: Edition Ebersbach, 2001. 11-22. Print. 18.

²⁰⁶ Jones, Katie. "'Ganz gewöhnlicher Ekel'?" Disgust and Body Motifs in Jenny Erpenbeck's *Geschichte vom alten Kind*." *Pushing at Boundaries: Approaches to Contemporary German Women Writers from Karen Duve to Jenny Erpenbeck*. Ed. Heike Bartel and Elizabeth Boa. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006. 119-133. Print.

²⁰⁷ Jones, Katie. *Representing Repulsion: The Aesthetics of Disgust in Contemporary Women's Writing in French and German*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2013. Print. 115.

but only mentions vague fears for the future.²⁰⁸ Gary Johnson defines allegories as figures of narrative, meaning that they can be present in all narratives so long as there is rhetorical purpose (authorial intent), transformation from the literal to the figural, and the reader's ability to accurately uncover the allegory.²⁰⁹

As an allegory not only for the GDR but also for memory discourses about the GDR, *Geschichte vom alten Kind* simultaneously enacts the attractive pull of forgetting and of returning to the presumed safety of enclosed spaces (childhood, GDR) and reveals the danger underpinning such an attraction. The woman-child's return to childhood in the orphanage is fraught with mimicry and failure. Though she experiences her silence and lack of remembering as a way to better integrate herself into daily life, her peers experience her silence and awkwardness as uncanny. They are relieved when she is hospitalized outside of the orphanage. Thus, *Geschichte vom alten Kind* poses but does not answer the question of how reunified Germany is meant to balance the need to remember with the desire to forget.

It is more difficult to locate the short story "Im Halbschatten meines Schädels" in the GDR. The story is what Gary Johnson calls a thematic allegory precisely because of the connections between its themes and aspects of the German Democratic Republic. The story takes place in an enclosed space. The narrator's movements are restricted, and she has an ambiguous relationship to power. She experiences the room where she is being held as simultaneously hers and as a dangerous site.

²⁰⁸ Jones, Katie. "'Ganz gewöhnlicher Ekel'? Disgust and Body Motifs in Jenny Erpenbeck's *Geschichte vom alten Kind*." *Pushing at Boundaries: Approaches to Contemporary German Women Writers from Karen Duve to Jenny Erpenbeck*. Ed. Heike Bartel and Elizabeth Boa. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006. 119-133. Print.

²⁰⁹ Johnson, Gary. *The Vitality of Allegory: Figural Narrative in Modern and Contemporary Fiction*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2012. Print.

Furthermore, “Im Halbschatten meines Schädels” is also about the relationship between remembering and forgetting. The unnamed narrator is being held captive by a man and his wife.²¹⁰ She is naked, never leaves the room in which she is imprisoned, and spends the majority of her time in bed. The room itself is sparsely furnished and contains only the narrator’s bed and a chair placed at the opposite end of the room. The door is ajar, the carpet would mask her footsteps, yet the narrator does not leave. Rather, she uses the blanket to make herself more comfortable and refers to both the room and bed as hers.

Additionally, escape is undermined by the narrative use of the subjunctive. The first sentence of the story reads: “Das Zimmer, in das er mich gebracht hat, ist mit dicken Teppichen ausgelegt, wenn ich laufen könnte, man würde es nicht hören.”²¹¹ He has brought her to a room with thick carpets. If she could walk, she could walk out of the room without being heard and therefore presumably without being stopped. In the second sentence of the story, the possibility of escape is again presented though it is revealed to be untenable: “Die Tür hat er nur angelehnt, wenn ich laufen könnte, könnte ich das Zimmer verlassen.”²¹² He left the door ajar, and if only she could walk, then she could leave the room. Like the narrator, East German citizens, though given the theoretical option to leave were also imprisoned physically (jailed for dissident acts, border control, the Wall) or psychologically (state surveillance and bureaucracy).

One way to read this story is as a mystery or crime story. Faye Stewart examines a variety of women’s and lesbian crime stories in order to delineate a new, more nuanced

²¹⁰ “Im Halbschatten meines Schädels” is the opening story of the collection *Tand* (2001). Print. It was also published in the anthology *Beste deutsche Erzähler 2001*. Ed Verena Auffermann. München: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2001. Print.

²¹¹ Erpenbeck, Jenny. “Im Halbschatten meines Schädels.” *Tand*. Berlin: Eichborn, 2001. 7-13. Print. 7.

²¹² *Ibid*, 7.

category of queer crime. Stewart defines queer crime as a genre that focuses on the performativity of gender, encourages multiple meanings, and does not neatly resolve the ending. She then weaves a brief reading of biographical and political memory of the GDR in her analysis of Barbara Neuhaus's "Frantiček."²¹³ Stewart connects memories of the GDR and now former Czechoslovakia with past and present "institutional misogyny" in order to suggest that "socialist society is literally and figuratively cold, especially for it[s] female citizens."²¹⁴ In this way, Stewart is able to discuss an analogous relationship between contemporary patriarchy and East German socialism. Though "Frantiček" and Stewart's reading thereof ultimately set aside memories of socialism in favor of moving into the future, the short story aligns femininity with the power to control memory—both personal and to a certain extent political. Similarly, "Im Halbschatten meines Schädels" fundamentally asks the question: What is at stake in remembering?

The narrative does not locate the room in any local, regional, or national context nor does it provide clues as to when and why the events are taking place. There are only two references to a time before and places outside of the room. Otherwise it is difficult to distinguish dialogue from memory or even to attribute speech. None of the characters are named and the narrator refers to the man as her lover and the woman as his wife. The severity of the situation is unclear and so is the nature of consent.

The narrator contextualizes her experiences in the room through that which she hears as well as her interactions with her lover and his wife. She presents the layout of the house through her sonic mapping. She can hear her lover shaving, windows and doors

²¹³ Neuhaus, Barbara. "Frantiček." *Mit Zorn, Charme & Methode oder: Die Aufklärung ist weiblich!* Ed Pieke Biermann. Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1992. 101-111. Print.

²¹⁴ Stewart, Fey. "Dialogues with Tradition: Feminist-Queer Encounters in German Crime Stories at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century." *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*. 35.1 (2011): 115-135. Print. 127.

closing, people talking, and “wie alle Geräusche kleiner werden, [ich] höre wie es Nacht wird, ich höre die Stille.”²¹⁵ While the narrator expresses familiarity with her captors and the space in which she is imprisoned, it remains unclear if she had been there before. She comments that she knows that there is an unused room next to hers. In contrast to the room in which she is held, the unused room is full of beautiful furniture—tables and sofas that remain without function. She also knows that her lover’s study is next to that room. However, the narrative does not reveal how she came to this knowledge, and any map she has of the space is fragmented and incomplete.

The lover and wife alternatively enter the room, sit on her bed, and either physically or psychologically torture her. It remains unclear whether or not the wife is also the man’s prisoner. The narrator describes her as looking like an abused woman; yet, during her visits, the wife demands that the narrator comment on what she is wearing and offer advice regarding what gifts the man should buy her. These visits are thus presented as a parody of friendship between the women. They “go out” for tea or lunch, “shop” together, give each other compliments, and gossip about the man in their lives.

Whenever they visit the narrator, her lover and his wife bring everyday objects—a teacup and saucer set, cigarettes and cigarette stubs, necklaces—with them. The objects that the wife brings with her emphasize their connection as women within the present moment. These objects are presented simply as *Zigarette(n)*, *Tasse*, *Untertasse*, *Kette*, and *Bettdecke*. Few adjectives and no brand names are used to describe them, contributing to the sense of timelessness within the room and the narrative.

²¹⁵ Erpenbeck, Jenny. “Im Halbschatten meines Schädels.” *Tand*. Berlin: Eichborn, 2001. 7-13. Print. 11.

These objects assume three primary roles: linking the characters to one another, evoking memories, and prompting forgetting. During one of her visits with the narrator, the wife tells the story of how she first met the man. They were in a seminar together in which he was the instructor and she the student. She recalls: “Er hat mich immer gezwungen, mich zu erinnern.”²¹⁶ The seminar room is located in the past; yet, in a series of temporal nesting dolls, the time before the seminar remains obscured. The *immer* allows the statement to almost be read in the present tense—He always forced me to remember. He always forces me to remember. This reading is underscored by the wife feeling as if she cannot exist without all the knowledge and memories he has put into her.

The women are materially linked to each other by a teacup and a necklace. Because the narrator is weakened by her imprisonment, the wife adopts the role of caregiver. At the beginning of the story, the wife enters with tea and establishes a connection to the narrator by giving her the teacup but not the saucer: “Sie setzt sich auf die Kante meines Bettes und hält die Untertasse, während ich trinke.”²¹⁷ Later, the narrator recounts: “[ich] setze die Lippen an die blaugeäderte Tasse, die sie mir gebracht hat....Sie nimmt mir die Tasse aus der Hand und stellt sie ab. Dann beugt sie sich über mich und dringt mit der Zunge in das Innere meines Mundes.”²¹⁸ The wife uses the teacup to first establish a link between herself and the narrator and then to display her agency over the other woman. The wife can give and take; furthermore, she has the ability to force herself on the narrator before leaving the room—actions which highlight the wife’s mobility and the narrator’s immobility. The wife forces the narrator to drink the tea and eat the food she brings,

²¹⁶ Ibid, 9.

²¹⁷ Ibid, 7.

²¹⁸ Ibid, 10.

converting an act of nourishment into a bodily intrusion. The violence of the wife's actions are further underscored by her sexual advances and the matter of fact way in which the narrator presents them. With the teacup, the wife establishes, manipulates but ultimately attempts to break the link between herself and the narrator.

There is a similar scene at the beginning of Christa Wolf's *Leibhaftig*. A trainee nurse deposits a teapot and teacup just out of the narrator's reach. A different nurse recognizes her distress and helps her drink the tea:

Da kommt zu ihrem großen Glück ein junger Mann in weißen Kittel mit ganz kurz geschnittenem Haar herein und beobachtet ihre Bemühungen. Na! Sagt er, geht hinaus und kommt nach Sekunden mit einer Schnabeltasse zurück, gießt den Tee um, stützt ihr den Kopf, hält die Tasse. So geht es doch besser, nicht? Sie trinkt, es gibt auf der Welt nicht nur das Wort, es gibt es wirklich: trinken.²¹⁹

While both narrators share in their helplessness, the narrator in *Leibhaftig* distances herself from the experience of her helplessness—through extreme observation and use of the third person pronoun to describe herself. She further makes herself the object of observation—a young doctor notices her distress and facilitates her independence. Though these actions are performed with a certain indifference, they ultimately acknowledge the narrator's autonomy. In contrast, the interactions that the narrator in "Im Halbschatten meines Schädels" has around the tea with the wife are ritualized and highlight the narrator's reliance on her captors.

While the wife engages in penetrating forms of abuse, the lover concentrates on marking the narrator's body. He wounds her feet with lit cigarettes and removes her blanket, allowing his gaze to take possession of her naked body, further exposing her vulnerability. During one of his visits, the lover brings a box filled with cigarette stubs and

²¹⁹ Wolf, Christa. *Leibhaftig*. München: Luchterhand, 2002. Print. 31.

a broken necklace. He demands that the narrator remember: “Du mußt dich erinnern...Das ist unsere Geschichte...”²²⁰ In showing the narrator the instruments of his torture, he is attempting to force her to remember the pain, to remember him. To which she replies: “Ich erinnere mich nicht...ich sehe zwei Zigarettenskippen und eine zerrissene Halskette.”²²¹ The narrator reduces the objects to that which they are—cigarette stubs and a broken necklace—and refuses to acknowledge that which they represent—her past, her pain, her connection to her lover and his wife. In grounding the objects in their sheer materiality, the narrator resists her torturer as well as the act of remembering.

It is the necklace that ultimately solidifies and symbolizes the link between the two women. Within the context of the narrative, the word necklace is used to refer not only to its function as a gift within an intimate relationship, but also to two material necklaces. The lover asks the narrator what he should give his wife. The narrator replies that the wife would like a pearl necklace though she cautions him that pearls bring unhappiness. The wife is thrilled with the gift, and the narrator derives pleasure from telling her that they bring bad luck. Both ignored her warning, but the wife’s new necklace connects all three of them to one another.

This connection is tenuous, however. First of all, the new necklace that the lover gives to his wife evokes the pearl pieces he shows the narrator during his attempts to force her to remember. What follows is the narrator’s memory of how the necklace was broken:

Wir fallen, wir stürzen, ich halte mich fest an meinem Geliebten, er hält mich, in die Tiefe, er hält mich am Hals, nein, er greift die Kette, die um meinen Hals liegt, wir fallen, er reißt an der Kette, wir stürzen, er will sie mir vom Hals reißen, die Kette, er reißt sie ab, ich stürze, ich allein, ins Wasser.²²²

²²⁰ Erpenbeck, Jenny. “Im Halbschatten meines Schädels.” *Tand*. Berlin: Eichborn, 2001. 7-13. Print. 11.

²²¹ *Ibid*, 11.

²²² *Ibid*, 8.

Her memory begins with the first person pronoun “wir,” underscoring her connection to the lover. However, the memory splits into “I” and “him”—she is holding on to him, he is holding on to her by the throat. As they fall, he rips the necklace from her throat, and she continues to fall alone. In her memory, she initially reads his act of aggression as one toward her body, not the necklace. Temporarily, the narrator and the object are interchangeable. However their outcomes are different. The necklace breaks, and she falls into the water.

While it is possible that the narrator is accurately albeit poetically remembering a real event, it is more probable that she is framing her memory of a violent act through metaphor. The fall most likely signals the end of their relationship, and her solo flight into the water the beginning of her resistance. The timelessness of the action, memory, and metaphor is underscored by the narrative use of the present tense. Even though this event presumably took place before the narrator’s imprisonment, through the mechanics of memory and metaphor, it is still happening.

Additionally, the water imagery introduced in this memory is instrumental to the narrator’s resistance of memory:

Ich erinnere mich nicht, sage ich, und lasse die Augen zufallen. Jetzt kann ich sehen, wie alles, an das ich mich erinnern müßte, in meinem Kopf herumschwimmt, Meeresstaub und Fetzen von Algen, Holz und abgestorbene Schalen, all das ist hineingespült worden, eine Zeitlang schwimmt es im Halbschatten meines Schädels, dann kommt die Flut und trägt es wieder heraus, an den Tag.”²²³

The water flows through her, overwhelming her. The narrator uses the water imagery to give in to forgetting and to resist that which her lover wants her to remember. In this

²²³ Ibid, 11.

manner, she makes herself into an empty vessel. She perceives her emptiness as resistance. Similarly, the narrator describes the wife as bruised. She is something from which nothing more can be taken: “Ich sehe: Wie gemeißelt ist dieses Profil, alles fest, die Linien brennen in meinen Augen. Und jetzt weiß ich: Sie muß keine Angst haben, aus diesem Gefäß kann niemals mehr jemand etwas herausnehmen.”²²⁴ It is unclear if the narrator is recognizing their common strength or their similar positions in relation to the lover. Given their similar positions, it is probable that the wife will, or already does, inhabit the narrator’s role—that is to say imprisoned by the lover. It is also not beyond the realm of reason that the narrator could come to inhabit the wife’s position. The narrator’s ability to forget grants her agency and some self-determination. It is also the quality that distinguishes her most from the wife.

It is important to note that within the love triangle, the women’s subjectivities come into being through their interactions with one another (though the reader only has access to the wife through the narrator) rather than through the man. The women struggle against identifying themselves in each other and ultimately assume two radically opposite positions in relation to memory and its attending objects: the wife succumbs to remembering, while the narrator attempts to forget.

As the narrator of “Im Halbschatten meines Schädels” negotiates between remembering and forgetting, so too does the woman-child in *Geschichte vom alten Kind*. Both do this while also occupying the role of the empty vessel and through their struggle to be heard—even if their only voice is silence. Erpenbeck’s two protagonists provide their own contexts for memory. The narrator in “Im Halbschatten meines Schädels” does so by

²²⁴ Ibid, 13.

explicitly narrating her own story. The woman-child in *Geschichte vom alten Kind* only “speaks” four times in the narrative, but the intense focalization through her perspective indicates that silence and forgetting are her weapons of choice. Ultimately, there is something unknowable and unresolvable about the places, narrators, and narratives of both Erpenbeck’s compelling texts.

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