

Children of a Former Future:  
Writing the Child in Cold War and post-Cold War German-Language Literature

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## ABSTRACT

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“Children of a Former Future” argues that the political upheavals of the twentieth century have produced a body of German-language literature that approaches children and childhood differently from the ways these subjects are conventionally represented. Christa Wolf, Herta Müller, and Jenny Erpenbeck use the child as a device for narrating failed states; socialization into obedience; and the simultaneous violence and fragility of normative visions of the future. In their narratives of girlhood under authoritarian or repressive societies, these authors self-consciously decouple the child from the concept of futurity in order to avoid reproducing the same representational strategies as the twentieth-century authoritarian regimes that co-opted the child for political ends.

Examining literature from the GDR, Communist Romania, and post-Reunification Germany, “Children of a Former Future” argues that these representations offer important insights into the fields of German literary studies, queer theory, and feminist scholarship. The dissertation contends that a historically-grounded reading of Cold War and post-Cold War German-language literature can meaningfully contribute to and complicate current feminist and queer scholarship on the child. This scholarship has focused primarily on historical, social, and cultural developments associated with Western democracies and capitalism. “Children of a Former Future” demonstrates how a consideration of literature from Socialist and post-Socialist context complicates these theorizations of the child. At the same time, the dissertation

demonstrates how the analytical modes developed by queer and feminist scholarship can create new frameworks for the interpretation of German-language literature.

“Children of a Former Future” examines authors who intentionally set out to complicate readers’ preconceptions about children in their writing, specifically the pervasive theme of childhood innocence. Written during the 1970s, Christa Wolf’s *Kindheitsmuster* (1976) examines the effects of authoritarianism on childhood development, as well as critiquing the German Democratic Republic’s founding historical myths. Herta Müller’s *Niederungen* (1982/4) and *Herztier* (1994) examine childhood in an ethnic German community in Communist Romania; Müller’s protagonists grapple with the legacies of their parents’ experiences with fascism and Soviet labor camps, as well as the experience of entering Romanian society as a cultural minority during the dictatorship of Nicolae Ceaușescu. Writing after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Jenny Erpenbeck’s *Geschichte vom alten Kind* (1999) and *Wörterbuch* (2005) critically examine the emotional impact of adult idealizations of childhood through the lens of post-authoritarian transition states.

“Children of a Former Future” argues that these narratives use the child to reflect on socialization into obedience and conformity; kinship formations; social reproduction; trauma; and political life. Wolf, Müller, and Erpenbeck highlight the ramifications of the emotional burdens placed on children, particularly on girls. Their representations resist conventional idealizations of children and childhood. Intensely concerned with complicity, the authors scrutinize how children are taught to conform to and even revere repressive social systems. The authors posit that certain childrearing practices in fact enable the rise of authoritarianism, in that they condition children that love is contingent upon obedience. The dissertation argues that for these authors, examinations of childhood are at once opportunities to sift through the experiences

that begin to constitute the individual self, and to analyze how these psychological dynamics contribute to, sustain, and reproduce larger social and political dynamics.

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*For my family*

## Introduction:

### Reading and Theorizing the Child

In a 1973 interview, East German writer Christa Wolf described the unique historical situation that had characterized her upbringing:

Was unsere Generation erlebt hat, wird nie wieder eine Generation erleben: in der einen Gesellschaft aufzuwachsen, erzogen, geprägt zu werden und der anderen - in unserer - die Möglichkeit zu einer an die gesellschaftlichen Wurzeln gehenden Kritik und Selbstkritik zu haben, zum Denken, Verstehen, Handeln kommen, dabei in neue, gewiß nicht einfache Widersprüche und Konflikte gestellt zu sein, mehr: diese Widersprüche selbst mit herzustellen und an ihrer Überwindung mitzuarbeiten, und dabei doch Verhaltensmuster nicht verleugnen zu können, die Kindheit und Jugend bestimmten. Wenn das kein widersprüchliches Kontinuum ist! Aber eben doch ein Kontinuum, denn es ist ein und derselbe Mensch, der das alles erfahren hat - aber ist er es noch?<sup>1</sup>

Wolf was a young child when the National Socialist party seized power in 1933. Her most formative years—childhood and adolescence—were shaped by the vision, ambition, and violence of the Nazi regime and its totalitarian permeation into every aspect of the society and culture around her. As an adult, Wolf was particularly haunted by the ease with which those around her had acclimated to and accommodated Nazism, actively or passively.

But at the age of sixteen, she experienced another historical upheaval: the collapse of the Third Reich following its defeat by the Allied Powers in the Second World War. Wolf saw the postwar establishment of the German Democratic Republic as a second chance—an opportunity to overcome her Nazi upbringing and participate in the construction of a new kind of society. While her disappointment at what the GDR actually delivered to its citizens would become a focal point of her oeuvre, the fact of this “second chance” was undeniably important to Wolf.

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<sup>1</sup> Christa Wolf, interview by Hans Kaufmann, “Subjektive Authentizität. Gespräch mit Hans Kaufmann,” in vol. 4 of *Werke in zwölf Bänden*, ed. by Sonja Hilzinger (Munich: Luchterhand, 1999), 422.

And yet, though the Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (SED) believed in its ability to completely reshape the post-Nazi German populace into good Socialist citizens,<sup>2</sup> Wolf refused to deny the lingering effects of National Socialism on her generation. The question of whether a person was a “continuum” of their cumulative experiences, and how childhood and youth shape adulthood, became especially pressing as she watched the next generation come of age. Born in the GDR, these young people could not comprehend what her generation had been through; Wolf felt it was her generation’s duty to help them understand, a process that necessitated an examination of the relationship between childhood and the adult self.<sup>3</sup> In insisting that “kein Mensch kann den Wirkungen entgehen oder sich von den Einflüssen trennen, die von seiner Kindheit und Jugend her in sein späteres Leben dringen,”<sup>4</sup> Wolf directly countered the GDR’s founding myth—that Communists had heroically resisted Nazism and that, following the war, the fascists and collaborators had all fled west.<sup>5</sup>

The themes Wolf raises in this interview pervade her writing about childhood: the experience of Nazism; of whether and to what extent a person can overcome such formative experiences; and the political importance of critiquing the narrative promoted by the same state that had given her a chance to experience a new kind of society. Far from being an occasion of nostalgia, remembering and representing childhood is, for Wolf, a highly charged means of addressing the problems of contemporary East German society. Given its political and ethical

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<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Julia Hell, *Post-Fascist Fantasies: Psychoanalysis, History, and the Literature of East Germany* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997); and Debbie Pinfold, “Das Mündel will Vormund sein’: The GDR State as Child,” *German Life and Letters* 64, no. 2 (2011): 283–304. Similar processes of reeducation, albeit towards a capitalist/democratic socio-political model, took place in West Germany. See Jaimey Fisher, *Disciplining Germany: Youth, Reeducation, and Reconstruction after the Second World War* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Wolf, “Subjektive Authentizität,” 415.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 414.

<sup>5</sup> On this founding myth, see Hell, especially chapters one and three.

weight, it is no surprise that Wolf struggled with how to transform her experience into aesthetics. The culmination of these efforts was her 1976 epic autobiographical work, *Kindheitsmuster*. Defying easy generic categorization, *Kindheitsmuster* self-consciously grapples with the problems of narrating the Nazi period, the unreliability of memory, and the ethics of turning the childhood self into a literary object.

For all her insight into the nature of the self and the importance of mining personal history for the benefit of the political present, one of Wolf's assertions would prove incorrect: namely that "[w]as unsere Generation erlebt hat, wird nie wieder eine Generation erleben." The GDR collapsed not long after celebrating its fortieth anniversary, with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the state's subsequent reunification with the Federal Republic of Germany under a Western-democratic system. The rest of the Eastern Bloc, including the Soviet Union, soon followed suit: between 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, another generation—not only in Central and Eastern Europe, but across Central Asia as well—experienced what Christa Wolf's had. Raised as children and adolescents to be citizens of one kind of state, they suddenly found themselves beginning adulthood in a society for which they were unprepared.

For those writing after 1945 and 1989, the experience of state collapse and the dissolution and discrediting of entire ways of life threw childhood into a different light. Their upbringing would never be repeated; in some cases, it would be actively repudiated in the education of the next generation. At the same time, the distance from what they once considered 'normal' led them to a greater awareness of the acculturation to and normalization of authoritarianism, and mechanisms of social reproduction.

This dissertation argues that such experiences have resulted in literature that approaches children and childhood differently from the ways these subjects are conventionally represented. So often made to stand in for the future, the dissertation examines how children are used in these texts for precisely the opposite ends. In these writings, the authors use the child as a device for narrating failed states and the fragility of normative visions of the future. Examining depictions of children and childhood from the GDR, Communist Romania, and post-Reunification Germany, this dissertation further argues that these representations offer important insights into the fields of German literary studies, queer theory, and feminist scholarship. The dissertation examines how Christa Wolf, Herta Müller, and Jenny Erpenbeck undermine the reproductive futurism so closely associated with children. However, rather than appropriate the figure of the child wholesale, these authors self-consciously construct narrative forms that seek to avoid reproducing the same representational strategies as the twentieth-century authoritarian regimes that co-opted the child for political ends.

### **The Child in Theory and Practice**

The child has been the subject of much scholarship, theory, and criticism. This work has done much to historicize the concept of childhood; to reveal the assumptions underlying the normative idea of the child; and to point out how the child has been used symbolically to promote the interests of some while marginalizing others. These critical interventions stem from a wide range of discourses and critical frameworks, not all of which are in dialogue with one another, or even necessarily mean the same thing by “the child.” What these text share is an attention to the social, historically-contingent construction of children and childhood. This dissertation draws on work from multiple critical frameworks and attempts to synthesize them in

a way that meaningfully addresses representations of children and childhood found in Christa Wolf, Herta Müller, and Jenny Erpenbeck. The aim of this chapter is to begin putting these disciplines into conversation with one another by introducing the dissertation's main interlocutors and intellectual genealogy.

At the same time, this chapter also introduces one of the dissertation's central critiques of scholarship on the child: namely, that while these theoretical insights are important and productive, they are also limited in terms of their historical scope. As we shall see, this scholarship deals primarily with Western thought since the Enlightenment; when it comes to the twentieth century, it deals more or less exclusively with capitalist, Western-democratic societies. The dissertation aims to show how examining representations of children growing up in authoritarian contexts can complicate and build on these existing frameworks and offer further possibilities for understanding and theorizing the child.

### *Theorizing the Child*

In the mid-twentieth century, scholars shifted away from viewing childhood as a 'natural' state and began to understand it as a social construction of the modern era. Philippe Ariès' groundbreaking study, *Centuries of Childhood* (1962), first argued that childhood has not always been a meaningful category in human history; on the contrary, he argues that the (Western) concept of a distinct phase of life known as "childhood" first arose in the early seventeenth century.<sup>6</sup> *Centuries of Childhood* opened up the discursive field of critical childhood studies by

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<sup>6</sup> Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, trans. Robert Baldick (New York: Knopf, 1962).

using evidence from material culture to historicize the development of modern childhood and the concept of children's innocence.

According to Ariès, prior to 1600, the period between infancy and adulthood was considered a general period of "youth," meaning "prime of life;" no distinction was made between children and adolescents.<sup>7</sup> Using evidence from material culture, Ariès traces the emergence of the concept of the child over the course of the seventeenth century. He argues, for example, that prior to the seventeenth century, specialized games for children did not exist: after the age of three or four, "*the child played the same games as the adult, either with other children or with adults.* [...] People had no objection to allowing children to play card games or games of chance, and to play for money."<sup>8</sup> As ideas about children and morality shifted over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, adults produced games deemed "suitable" for children, which did not involve playing for money (i.e., gambling).

Rather than dismissing this as a frivolous development, Ariès reads it as indicative of a broader cultural changes, including the general public's new understanding of childhood as a period of "innocence."<sup>9</sup> Ushered in by "a powerful and educated minority of rigid moralists" and later influenced by the philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who associated childhood with "primitivism" and "irrationalism," these shifts had major ramifications for pedagogy and educational institutions, as well as family and domestic life.<sup>10</sup> Ariès writes that "[t]he idea of childish innocence resulted in two kinds of attitudes and behavior towards childhood: firstly, safeguarding it against pollution by life, and particularly by the sexuality tolerated if not

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<sup>7</sup> See *ibid.*, Part One, especially 25-35.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 71. Italics in original.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 86-106.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 81; 119. On Rousseau, see also Henry Jenkins, "Introduction: Childhood Innocence and Other Modern Myths," in *The Children's Culture Reader*, ed. Henry Jenkins (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 18.



approved of among adults; and secondly, strengthening it by developing character and reason.”<sup>11</sup>

According to Ariès, the attachment to children’s innocence increased over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, eventually culminating in a “Victorian gravity” towards children and their need for protection, naturalizing what was in fact a historically-constructed, class-specific attitude.<sup>12</sup>

The themes identified in *Centuries of Childhood*—the construction of innocence; the child’s need for protection from the world; the child’s otherness—would continue to be pivotal themes in scholarship on childhood. Although Ariès’ book laid critical foundations for subsequent research, its claims have not gone without criticism. Many scholars have since corrected and nuanced Ariès’ historical account since the book’s initial publication.<sup>13</sup> Because of its emphasis on the stakes of the personal and of family life, feminist scholarship has played a particularly important role in examining the ways in which modern ideas about children and childhood innocence have been deployed for political and commercial ends.<sup>14</sup> Feminist scholars have examined the politics of motherhood; the construction of gender through socialization and material culture; and the intersections of gender, race, and class in pedagogical, psychological, and popular discourses.<sup>15</sup>

Others have drawn attention to Ariès’ historical blind spots. James R. Kincaid has argued that Ariès misses continuities with eras prior to 1600; misreads Romantic philosophy; and

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 402.

<sup>13</sup> For an overview of scholarship in critical childhood studies, see Jenkins, “Introduction,” 15-9.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 30-1.

<sup>15</sup> See e.g. Annette Kuhn, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* (London: Verso, 1995); Carolyn Steedman, *The Tidy House: Little Girls Writing* (London: Virago, 1982); Ellen Seiter, *Sold Separately: Parents and Children in Consumer Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995); Barrie Thorne, *Gender Play: Girls and Boys in School* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993); Valerie Walkerdine, “Popular Culture and the Eroticization of Little Girls,” in Jenkins, 254–64.

neglects to mention later developments in material culture than might have necessitated a shift in his historical narrative.<sup>16</sup> Kincaid takes particular issue with the representation of Victorian culture as monolithic, prudish, and obsessed with innocence, showing that Victorian attitudes towards both children and innocence varied widely.<sup>17</sup> Demonstrating the varied constructions of the child prevalent in the nineteenth century (including “erotic” and eroticized children), Kincaid argues that, if anything, “this innocent child may be a very-late-Victorian or, more likely, modern imposition.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, the Victorian concept of childhood innocence may itself be a kind of straw man, whose affirmation or repudiation contributes to the construction of our own contemporary ideas about children and childhood.

That said, Kincaid in no way denies the importance of children’s innocence to contemporary culture. He argues that “[b]y insisting so loudly on the innocence, purity, and asexuality of the child, we have created a subversive echo: experience, corruption, eroticism.”<sup>19</sup> The emphasis on innocence ends up creating its opposite, the sexual predator or pedophile. Kincaid clarifies that he is speaking about social functions and roles, not actual people: the social imaginary produces its monstrous “Other” so that the majority of subjects can reassure themselves that they are “normal,” even as normative society continues to produce eroticized and titillating narratives about children.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> James R. Kincaid, *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 61-5.

<sup>17</sup> See *ibid.*, especially chapter two.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 5. Unfortunately, this clarification did not prevent Kincaid from being accused of promoting pedophilia upon the book’s publication. See James R. Kincaid, “Producing Erotic Children,” in *The Children’s Culture Reader*, 241–53.

In literary criticism, one of the most important contributions to theoretical work on children and childhood innocence comes from Jacqueline Rose's *The Case of Peter Pan, or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (1984). Taking *Peter Pan* as her point of departure, Rose elucidates the fundamental yet unexamined assumptions about actual children underlying the category of children's literature:

Children's fiction has never completely severed its links with a philosophy which sets up the child as a pure point of origin in relation to language, sexuality and the state. [...] Children's fiction emerges, therefore, out of a conception of both the child and the world as knowable in a direct and unmediated way, a conception which places the innocence of the child and a primary state of language and/or culture in a close and mutually dependent relation.<sup>21</sup>

According to Rose, this genre of fiction imagines children in a universalized, almost prelapsarian relation to nature, language, and culture. Rose contends here not only with the legacy of the Enlightenment (via Locke) and Romanticism (via Rousseau), but with psychoanalysis as well.<sup>22</sup> Arguing that our current understanding of childhood is based on a reductive reading of Sigmund Freud, Rose points out that Freud came to the concept of the unconscious by thinking about childhood, insisting that "childhood is something in which we continue to be implicated and which is never simply left behind."<sup>23</sup> Although psychoanalytic theory has been misrepresented as claiming that childhood is a discrete point to which one can regress, Rose emphasizes that Freud himself understood childhood as always with us.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan, or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1984), 8-9. Cf. Kincaid, 63-4. See also chapter two.

<sup>22</sup> Like many scholars discussing the discursive construction of children, "Romanticism" in Rose becomes a kind of shorthand for certain attitudes about man's relationship to nature, rather than a sustained, historically-specific examination of that period.

<sup>23</sup> Rose, 12.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Chapter Three on Herta Müller.

Freud's model of childhood sexuality has, however, had significant implications for psychoanalytic interpretations of fantasy in children's literature. Rose argues that because he linked so-called "perverse" sexuality and forms of sexuality observed in children,<sup>25</sup> Freud (inadvertently) laid the groundwork for later reading practices:

Freud effected a break in our conception of both sexuality and childhood from which we do not seem to have recovered. The neurotic simply bears witness to the effects of what is always at some level an impossible task—the task of cohering the fragmented, component and perverse sexuality of the child. The fact that Freud used a myth to describe how this ordering [of childhood sexuality] is meant to take place (the myth of Oedipus) should alert us to the fictional nature of this process, which is at best precarious, and never complete.<sup>26</sup>

According to Rose, subsequent psychoanalytic critics concluded that implicit in the idea of the neurotic returning to childhood in order to 'cohere' a 'fragmented' sexuality is something like an "ultimate identity" that can be accessed by resolving the Oedipal drama. For Rose, this assumption underlies the work of Bruno Bettelheim, who famously wrote about the psychological function of fairy tales.<sup>27</sup> Bettelheim and others, Rose argues, read children's literature as if it contains "a type of original innocence of meaning," resulting in an analysis that assumes "one thing straightforwardly *equals* another"—an interpretive practice that would be dismissed were it applied to literature written for adults.<sup>28</sup> For Rose, this belies a desire for an ultimate or true meaning in these texts: "we presuppose a pure point of origin lurking behind the text which we, as adults and critics, can trace."<sup>29</sup> The belief in an "original innocence of

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<sup>25</sup> See e.g. Sigmund Freud, "Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie," in *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Anna Freud, vol. 5 (1905; London: Imago Publishing, 1952), especially 70-1 and 132-45.

<sup>26</sup> Rose, 14.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. See also Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1976).

<sup>28</sup> Rose, 19.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

meaning” has become entangled with the idea of the innocent child, which seems to “sanction that concept of a pure origin because the child is seen as just such an origin itself.”<sup>30</sup> In analyses of children’s literature, then, the myth of the innocent child and the myth of the innocent text mutually reinforce one another.

All of this raises the question: *for whom* children’s literature is written? In response, Rose offers the radical proposition that “[t]here is no child behind the category ‘children’s fiction’, other than the one which the category itself sets in place, one which needs to believe it is there for its own purposes.”<sup>31</sup> Significantly, Rose takes care to explain that her interest lies in the idea of the child as imagined by children’s fiction, not the experiences of the actual children who read *Peter Pan*.<sup>32</sup> This distinction between the child-as-idea and actual children is an important one, as it also characterizes much of the work on the child done in the framework of queer theory.<sup>33</sup> Rose’s work shifts our attention towards the adult author of the representation of the child, and the adult’s emotional and/or intellectual investment in children’s innocence.

Similarly, much of queer theory deliberately sets aside the issue of real children in favor of examining the social and political investments made in the idea of the child. In his seminal polemic, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), Lee Edelman identifies the image of “the Child” (the capital letter indicating a figure rather than real, historical children) as the embodiment of reproductive futurity in contemporary society. Writing in response to the “compassionate conservatism” of the George W. Bush era, as well as the political rhetoric of

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>33</sup> It is worth noting that the distinction between historical children and “ideal” children (i.e., as imagined by “moralists”) is already implicit in Ariès’ work, but Ariès is more interested in the ways that new ideas about children’s innocence came to shape the experiences and education of actual children.

the 1990s, Edelman argues that “the fantasy subtending the image of the Child invariably shapes the logic within which the political itself must be thought.”<sup>34</sup> That is, the Child is made to stand in for the kind of future envisioned by U.S. American conservatives: a future that protects and values white, upper-/middle-class children’s innocence.

The logic of this politics dictates that the Child must be protected from those who would harm him (in Edelman’s readings, the Child is typically figured as male), namely queer people (also figured here as male). Queer people are painted as an immediate threat to the child, as well as a larger, existential danger to the future of society (due to their perceived inability to participate in heterosexual reproductive futurism). Edelman writes that the “coercive universalization” of the Child

serves to regulate political discourse—to prescribe what will *count* as political discourse—by compelling such discourse to accede in advance to the reality of a collective future whose figurative status we are never permitted to acknowledge or address. [...] That figural Child alone embodies the citizen as ideal, entitled to claim full rights to its future share in the nation’s good, though always at the cost of limiting the rights ‘real’ citizens are allowed. For the social order exists to preserve for this universalized subject, this fantasmatic Child, a notional freedom more highly valued than the actuality of freedom itself, which might, after all, put at risk the Child to whom such a freedom falls due.<sup>35</sup>

The distinction between the idea or image of the Child and actual children serves Edelman’s argument well, because the true goal of the political discourse that exploits the Child is not the protection of children. The social order described by Edelman has no interest in whether children might grow up to claim the rights enshrined in their names. In fact, the success of this political strategy requires the Child to never grow up, and instead forever remain a symbol of the future. Instead of ensuring children’s futures, Edelman argues that the “fascism of the baby’s face”

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<sup>34</sup> Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 2.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 11, italics in original.

serves to regulate who may participate in shaping a political future, and who must be excluded.<sup>36</sup> For Edelman, the calculus is clear: “the sacralization of the Child thus necessitates the sacrifice of the queer.”<sup>37</sup> His response is a radical negativity and wholesale rejection not only of reproductive futurism, but of futurity itself, encapsulated in the book’s most infamous provocation: “Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized; fuck Annie; fuck the waif from *Les Mis*; [...] fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop.”<sup>38</sup>

Edelman goes on to discuss queerness and the death drive, building particularly on a Lacanian psychoanalytic framework.<sup>39</sup> Unlike Rose, Edelman is not interested in the relationship between psychoanalysis and childhood; rather, his interest lies in uses of the Child as a signifier on the one hand, and the position of the homosexual as “*embodying* the remainder of the Real internal to the Symbolic order” on the other.<sup>40</sup> Edelman constructs the Child in opposition to what he calls the “*sinthomosexuality*” (after Lacan’s *sinthome*), which he defines as a “site where the fantasy of futurism confronts the insistence of a jouissance that rends it precisely by *rendering* it in relation to [the death] drive.”<sup>41</sup> Edelman figures the *sinthomosexual* as a figure of refusal, constituted in part by his refusal to sacrifice himself for the Child and the future it represents.

While others have gone on to critique queer pessimism and Edelman’s radical negativity, efforts to imagine and recoup a sense of queer futurity have tended not to fight this battle over

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>39</sup> See *ibid.*, chapters one and two, especially 7-11 and 35-9.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 25. Italics in original.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 38. Italics in original.

the image of the child. For example, in one of the most notable responses to Edelman, José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009) looks instead to German Idealism, the Frankfurt School, and the writings of Ernst Bloch to imbue queer times and spaces with moments of utopian possibility.<sup>42</sup>

The move away from children and the Child is understandable given the purview of queer theory, which seeks to decenter and dismantle heteronormative and heterocentric intellectual paradigms. Yet alongside the desire to uncouple the Child from the futurity to which it has so long been attached is a different impulse, namely to create space for the idea of queer children and queer childhood. In "How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay," Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick identified an assumption underlying both popular culture and therapeutic writings: children are always assumed to be straight (or else not-yet straight, as popular culture would rather deny that the child has any sexual orientation whatsoever).<sup>43</sup> For Sedgwick, this reflects "the wish that gay people *not exist*. [...] The overarching lie [of these texts] is that they are predicated on anything but the therapists' disavowed desire for a nongay outcome."<sup>44</sup> Given this larger desire for queer erasure, Sedgwick concludes that there is no "unthreatened, unthreatening theoretical home for a concept of gay and lesbian origins."<sup>45</sup>

Katheryn Bond Stockton takes up Sedgwick's challenge and sets out to create a theoretical space for queerness in childhood. Instead of sticking to the normative association of children with futurity, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (2008) looks at the retrospective creation of the gay child through narrative, and examines moments in

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<sup>42</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), Introduction.

<sup>43</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay," in *The Children's Culture Reader*, 231–40.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 238



which queer children don't grow up (implying futurity), but sideways—they delay the future rather than move forward in time.<sup>46</sup> Drawing on a primarily literary and filmic archive, Stockton uses the idea of the queer child to tackle the “problem of the child as a general idea:” “The child,” she writes, “is precisely who we are not and, in fact, never were. It is the act of adults looking back. It is a ghostly, unreachable fancy.”<sup>47</sup>

Drawing on Sedgwick's observation that children are presumed both straight and not yet sexual, Stockton argues that queer or protogay children have no narratives or forms through which they might understand their lived present. Describing childhood as “queer” is therefore a kind of “backward birth,” making “the hunt for the roots of queerness a retrospective search for amalgamated forms of feelings, desires, and physical needs that led to this death of one's straight life.”<sup>48</sup> Describing oneself as a queer child is a retrospective ordering of experience, a way of describing what one felt but lacked the language to describe.

Considering the concept of the backwards birth, however, leads to an even broader set of implications for the child-as-general-idea. For Stockton, it is not only queer childhood that is constructed in retrospect: “the gay child makes us perceive the queer temporalities haunting all children. For no matter how you slice it, the child from the standpoint of the ‘normal’ adult is always queer.”<sup>49</sup> Children, she argues, are always queer in the sense of being strange to adults. Adults are estranged from their childhood selves by time; furthermore, children are governed by

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<sup>46</sup> Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), Introduction.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

a separate set of laws and social norms. Even the innocence so valued by adult society makes them strange to adults, because adults are characterized in opposition to innocence.<sup>50</sup>

From Ariès to Stockton, the social construction of the innocent child provides a framework for understanding the ways that innocence is mobilized against certain kinds of subjects, as well as how innocence estranges children and adults. Yet for all of the fascinating insights opened up by this line of inquiry, the examination of the child in the field of queer theory, literary, and cultural studies has generally been limited to Anglo-American and French perspectives. Capitalism, consumerism, and popular culture play major roles in these analyses. Critics generally identify two major historical shifts as contributing to the twentieth-century construction of the child: the abolition of children's wage labor and the rise of youth consumer culture.<sup>51</sup> Implicitly, then, the child in question is in fact the child as constructed by capitalism: freed from the imperative to work and generate wages for the family, the narrative goes, the child increasingly came to be seen as "precious" and "priceless."<sup>52</sup> When young people began to have excess spending money and their parents acquired more disposable income, manufacturers and advertisers looked to children and teens as a new demographic for marketing popular culture and consumer goods, from comic books to clothing.<sup>53</sup> Queer theory, too, draws on this narrative.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 16-31.

<sup>51</sup> On the discursive shifts resulting from the shift away from child labor, see e.g. Stockton, introduction; and Viviana A. Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), especially Introduction and chapters one and two. On the youth, popular culture, and consumerism, see e.g. Richard deCordova, "The Mickey in Macy's Window: Childhood, Consumerism, and Disney Animation," in *Disney Discourse: Producing the Magic Kingdom*, ed. Eric Smoodin (New York: Routledge, 1994), 203-13; Bill Osgerby, *Youth in Britain Since 1945* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998); Lynn Spigel, "Seducing the Innocent: Childhood and Television in Postwar America," in Jenkins, 110-35; and Mark I. West, *Children, Culture, and Controversy* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1988), especially chapter five. On the effects of popular media on the boundaries between childhood and adulthood, see Neil Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1982).

<sup>52</sup> On how the sacralization of the child was used to end child labor and resulted in this profound cultural shift, see Zelizer, especially chapters one and two.

<sup>53</sup> See e.g. deCordova; Miriam Formanek-Brunell, *Made to Play House: Dolls and the Commercialization of American Girlhood, 1830 - 1930* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); Stephen Kline, *Out of the*

Stockton, for example, specifically constructs a reading of children and money around the intersections of capital, the “priceless” child, and (some) children’s delayed relation to labor.<sup>54</sup>

Scholarship on youth in postwar Western Europe has followed similar trends, examining the role of youth in the post-reconstruction explosion of consumer culture, and Europeans’ attendant anxieties about the influence of the United States via consumer goods and popular media.<sup>55</sup>

But examining this body of scholarship from the perspective of the Cold War reveals a gap in the literature, specifically when it comes to literary and cultural studies: what happens to these theorizations of the child outside the contexts of Western capitalism and democracy? How does an Eastern Bloc perspective shift the narrative of child-as-consumer? How might narratives of childhood under authoritarianism add to current understandings of the socialization of children into adult culture? And what happens to this symbol of futurity when the child is used to narrate the experiences of social decay and state collapse?

One of the central arguments of this dissertation is that a historically-grounded reading of Cold War-era German-language literature can meaningfully add to and complicate the already substantial body of feminist and queer scholarship on the child. Beyond the fact that Eastern Bloc societies promoted different attitudes towards commodity culture (when consumer goods were available at all), examining these contexts reveals how authoritarian regimes limit agency and possibility. Studies of children’s relationship to popular media and products marketed at them are usually predicated on the availability of different choices, offered by competing forces

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*Garden: Toys and Children’s Culture in the Age of TV Marketing* (New York: Verso, 1995); Seiter; Spiegel; and West.

<sup>54</sup> See Stockton, 37-48 and 221-6.

<sup>55</sup> See e.g. Kaspar Maase, “Establishing Cultural Democracy: Youth, ‘Americanization,’ and the Irresistible Rise of Popular Culture,” in *The Miracle Years: A Cultural History of West Germany, 1949 - 1968*, ed. Hanna Schissler (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 428–50.

(however limited or problematic). To be sure, there are politics involved in any action undertaken in a capitalist culture. However, in under an authoritarian regime, consumption is always directly linked to the state. Consumption of luxury goods can signify complicity with that regime, whereas seeking alternatives is a far more loaded and often dangerous choice. And while scholarship on innocence usually includes “innocence of politics,” this is not the case in an authoritarian or totalitarian state. As we shall see, in the narratives examined here, children are aware of politics—and the role they are expected to play in the state—from a very young age.

Furthermore, this dissertation specifically examines the work of three Socialist and post-Socialist authors—Christa Wolf, Herta Müller, and Jenny Erpenbeck—not only for the benefit of the alternative social and political contexts, but also because these authors intentionally set out to complicate readers’ preconceptions about children in their writing, specifically the pervasive concept of childhood innocence. In examining the construction of the child, many critics focus on representations of innocent children (*Peter Pan*, for instance). They reveal how such representations naturalize or reify ideas about “normative” childhood. By contrast, a huge amount of critical work is already being done in the literature under consideration here. Already aware of how representations of children can be coopted for nefarious political ends, Wolf, Müller, and Erpenbeck analyze, dismantle, and subvert conventional ideas about children’s innocence. Instead of making the child stand in for a sunny future, they use narratives about children to narrate failed states and the fragility of social formations. They reveal the ways in which children’s supposed innocence actually renders them uncanny, estranged from the adults around them, and, in the context of authoritarian states, both vulnerable and dangerous to the adults around them.

*Reading the Child in German Literature and Criticism*

In addition to addressing a gap in scholarship on the child, this dissertation also argues that an analytical focus on the child—and specifically, on narratives of girlhood—can likewise address a gap within the field of German literary studies. When it comes to children, criticism focusing on German-language literary texts overwhelmingly concentrates on two areas: fairy tales and the Third Reich.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, examinations of “child” protagonists almost always refer to *male* children.<sup>57</sup> Although feminist scholarship has pointed out that examinations of “the child” often figure the “universal” child as male,<sup>58</sup> in the case of German literature, this is also a larger issue of the makeup of the canon: the most well-known narratives about children are usually about boys.

A significant exception here comes from the genre of the *Märchen*, many of which feature girls. Maria Tatar’s work has done much to explore the ways in which the Grimms’ reshaping of oral culture resulted in stories that delineate and enforce gender norms; by comparing boy and girl protagonists, she shows just how much gender shapes adults’ reactions to children’s behavior.<sup>59</sup> Tatar furthermore criticizes Bettelheim’s reading of fairy tales, arguing that his interpretations run not only counter to the original stories (which, prior to the intervention of the Grimms, were not didactic), but also that Bettelheim selects stories that

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<sup>56</sup> See Amir Eshel, *Futurity: Contemporary Literature and the Quest for the Past* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), especially chapter two; Debbie Pinfold, *The Child’s View of the Third Reich in German Literature: The Eye among the Blind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Maria Tatar, *Off with Their Heads!: Fairy Tales and the Culture of Childhood* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992); Joseph Zornado, *Inventing the Child: Culture, Ideology, and the Story of Childhood* (New York: Garland, 2001), especially Introduction and chapter three.

<sup>57</sup> A notable exception here is Pinfold, whose *Child’s View of the Third Reich* incorporates Christa Wolf’s *Nelly*, as well as memoirist Cordelia Edvardson and the diary of Anne Frank.

<sup>58</sup> On the equation of “neutrality” with boys, see e.g. Walkerdine.

<sup>59</sup> See Maria Tatar, *Off with Their Heads!: Fairy Tales and the Culture of Childhood* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), especially Introduction and chapters one, three, five, and six.

could be harnessed into service to support Freudian oedipal plots that position the child as a transgressor whose deserved punishment provides a lesson for unruly children. Stories that run counter to Freudian orthodoxy are, to a large extent, suppressed by Bettelheim or rewritten through reinterpretation.<sup>60</sup>

Bettelheim's interpretive work, Tatar argues, says more about his cultural moment than the stories themselves. She offers counternarratives in her own readings, which focus on the cruelty of individual adults, adult society, and the historical context behind the fairy tales rather than whether the children are deserving of punishment.

That said, figures like *Rotkäppchen*, Gretel, and *das Marienkind* are not three-dimensional characters, nor does the *Märchen*—by the very nature of its genre—offer a sustained examination of childhood. By contrast, Wolf, Müller, and Erpenbeck all devote significant attention to the specific experiences of girls, including how girls are socialized into the gender roles that sustain reproductive futurism and how the normative construction of gender is bound up in the politics of the authoritarian state. It is worth briefly comparing their approach with that of the most well-known child in twentieth-century German literature (if not the entire canon): Oskar Mazerath, the anti-hero of Günter Grass' *Die Blechtrommel* (1959).

Like Christa Wolf, Grass came of age under the Nazi regime. *Die Blechtrommel* is a satirical exploration of the Nazis' rise to power, the Second World War, and the Reconstruction period. His protagonist, Oskar, is an unreliable narrator, who, though born with the consciousness of a highly intelligent man, chooses to retain the outward appearance of a three-year-old for most of the novel in order to play his tin drum rather than participate in adult society. Oskar is mischievous, anarchic, and playful, outwitting the adults around him and using his child's form to maneuver into places he has no right to be. He revels in his difference,

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., xxi-ii.

playing up his childishness and his apparently abnormal development to get what he wants. Oskar is an outsider, an observer, and a disrupter of others' actions.

Though he takes advantage of the guise of childishness, Oskar disdains both childish behavior and actual children. Pretending to be a child allows him to opt out of participation in the world around him; even when Oskar's antics are amoral or outright murderous, his actions are at the very least acts of individuality in an age of conformity. Both Grass' approach and the reception of the novel were no doubt shaped by the fact that *Blechtrommel* was written and published in the liberal-democratic Federal Republic of Germany; the novel furthermore responds to and critiques West German efforts at *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, or the so-called "mastering" of the recent Nazi past.<sup>61</sup>

While *Blechtrommel* shares many thematic similarities with Wolf, Müller, and Erpenbeck (coming to terms with the past in Wolf and Müller; playing at childishness in Erpenbeck), the differences are instructive. For one, not only do Wolf, Müller, and Erpenbeck write about girls, but they also write with an extraordinary sensitivity to their characters' inner lives. This dissertation argues that they do so in order to foreground life experiences that are often underrepresented by both society and literature, as well as to reconstruct the psychic effects of authoritarianism on girls. As a result, their works eschew Grass' satirical tone, even if their writings are at times playful or parodic. The different historical moments of their publications also inevitably colored the reception of their work. Christa Wolf published *Kindheitsmuster* more than a decade after Grass' *Blechtrommel*; when it came out, readers and critics concentrated

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<sup>61</sup> See Eshel, chapter two; Siegfried Mews, *Günter Grass and His Critics: From The Tin Drum to Crabwalk* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2008), chapter one; Stuart Parkes, "Grass and His Contemporaries in East and West," in *The Cambridge Companion to Günter Grass*, ed. Stuart Taberner (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 209–22; and Ernestine S. Schlant, *The Language of Silence: West German Literature and the Holocaust* (New York: Routledge, 1999), chapter one.

heavily on the fact that it directly challenged the GDR's historical narrative of the Third Reich and the subsequent establishment of state socialism in East Germany.<sup>62</sup> For the publication of *Niederungen* in the West, Herta Müller's publisher edited the text to shape it to West German expectations about life under Communism.<sup>63</sup> And Jenny Erpenbeck's work, particularly *Geschichte vom alten Kind* (1999), has primarily been read in relation to the narrative of post-Socialist *Ostalgie*.<sup>64</sup>

Their works are rarely about bucking social norms, but rather the intense pressure girls feel to conform (or at least appear to), and the emotional burden that conformity entails. In the rare instances in which their girl-protagonists misbehave, they are often punished or consumed with guilt and fear of punishment—a rare occurrence for Oskar Mazerath, who is often able to punt culpability to others. Oskar, furthermore, is engaged in an openly antagonistic relationship to both of his presumptive fathers (one Polish, one German), and is in fact responsible for both of their deaths. In Wolf, Müller, and Erpenbeck, even when the protagonists have ambivalent feelings towards their families, the narration also stresses their dependence, a fact of survival which mitigates or even forecloses their ability to rebel. Thus, even a brief comparison makes clear that texts about girlhood open up a different perspective on the experience of authoritarianism in the twentieth century.

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<sup>62</sup> Sonja Hilzinger, "Entstehung, Veröffentlichung und Rezeption," in *Kindheitsmuster*, ed. Sonja Hilzinger, vol. 5, Werke (Munich: Luchterhand, 2000), 647–59.

<sup>63</sup> Wiebke Sievers, "Von der rumäniendeutschen Anti-Heimat zum Inbild kommunistischen Grauens: Die Rezeption Herta Müllers in der BRD, in Großbritannien, in Frankreich und in den USA," *German Monitor* 68, no. 1 (2007): 299–316.

<sup>64</sup> Nancy Nobile, "'So morgen wie heut: Time and Context in Jenny Erpenbeck's *Geschichte vom alten Kind*,'" *Gegenwartsliteratur* 2 (2003): 283–310.



## **A Hybrid Theoretical Framework**

In order to develop a reading of the child and the narrative purposes it serves in these texts, this dissertation attempts to develop an intellectual framework comprised of multiple scholarly traditions, primarily German literary criticism, feminist scholarship, and queer theory. From German literary studies, of course, comes not only the historical perspective, but the attention to these texts as part of a specific literary tradition and discursive field. It examines the narrative and aesthetic choices made by each author in her representations of children and youth (particularly girls and young women), and what these choices reveal about her work as a whole. In some cases, children are depicted as fully-developed characters with rich interior lives. In others, they are secondary characters who serve to illustrate some commonly held understanding about childhood; moral or psychological development; the inception of authoritarian states; and the creation of authoritarian subjects. Additionally, the dissertation draws on queer and feminist modes of scholarship. That is to say, it reads these texts with attention to topics such as the construction of gender, sexuality, family, and other kinship formations, as well as how these topics interact with larger political and social structures.

It should be noted that, for the most part, this dissertation refers to “the child” rather than “the Child” or “the girl.” It eschews Edelman’s capitalization in order to avoid entanglement with his Lacanian framework, even though I will discuss representations of children as much as (if not more than) actual children. And although I will sometimes make specific observations and claims about the experiences of girls, I use “the child” in part to avoid perpetuating the tacit assumption that “the child” always means “boy.”

While this dissertation draws heavily on queer theory, taking Stockton’s *Queer Child* as one of its primary interlocutors, it differs from most queer scholarship in a few significant ways.

Queer theory has been criticized for its lack of attentiveness to both children's literature and actual children; these are criticisms I have tried to take into account while crafting this analysis.<sup>65</sup> None of texts under examination here, however, belongs to the genre of children's literature; they were produced with primarily adult audiences in mind. However, this dissertation attempts where possible to incorporate the work of scholars of children's literature such as Rose and Tatar, particularly their insights into the adult construction of the child.

The dissertation takes the child as a category of analysis, arguing that representations of girls in postwar-German literature of the Eastern Bloc and post-*Wende* era illustrate the kind of questions and insights that open up when the narrative and thematic significance of the child is taken seriously. The authors under consideration have been selected in part because they are all to some degree concerned with the lived experiences of actual children. So while the dissertation is not a historical study of childhood, children's experiences as represented in the literature do comprise a portion of each analysis because these authors choose to foreground those experiences.

Finally, the dissertation's most significant divergence from queer theory lies in the fact that it does not deal primarily with queer authors or characters, or focus on queerness as such. The development of sexuality and the child's socialization into gender roles are important parts of this narrative, to be sure. But none of these protagonists (with the arguable exception of Jenny Erpenbeck's "altes Kind") can truly be called queer in the in the sense of Kathryn Bond Stockton's queer child or Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's proto-gay child.

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<sup>65</sup> See e.g. Kenneth Kidd, "Queer Theory's Child and Children's Literature Studies," *PMLA* 126, no. 1 (2011): 182–88; and Karin Lesnik-Oberstein and Stephen Thomson, "What Is Queer Theory Doing With the Child?," *Parallax* 8, no. 1 (2002): 35–46.

Kenneth Kidd has argued that “there seem to be two traditions of the child relation in queer theory, one concerned with queering the child, or exposing the child’s latent queerness, and the other more interested in exposing the Child’s normative power.”<sup>66</sup> The children under examination the body of literature I examine are queer in the double-entendre sense of “strange;” they are alienated from the adult society around them, and sometimes alienating to the reader. In Wolf’s *Kindheitsmuster*, time has estranged the adult narrator from her childhood self; to represent that difference, Wolf uses different pronouns to represent these divergent selves, creating a kind of Brechtian “alienation effect” [*Verfremdungseffekt*]. By contrast, Müller focuses on the ways in which the child’s lack of experience alienates her from the adults around her; she explores how feelings of otherness and difference result in an intense desire to conform. The children in these texts are also “strange” in the sense of the Freudian “uncanny:” both familiar and unfamiliar, and therefore unsettling. The sense of the uncanny is heightened in Erpenbeck’s fiction: in *Geschichte vom alten Kind* and *Wörterbuch*, Erpenbeck uses the qualities associated with the idealized child and to reveal the grotesque latent in adult fetishizations of innocence.

The “normative power” of the child is indeed an important problematic in these texts, particularly in the context of the authoritarian society, but their treatment of normativity further distinguishes these works from those examined by, say, Lee Edelman. In Edelman, the Child is a pawn in a particular political discourse; that discourse seeks to naturalize itself through its association with reproductive futurism. Instead of looking for works that exemplify normativity, I have chosen to focus on authors who are already aware of the ways the child can be figured for

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<sup>66</sup> Kidd, 183.

political ends. Their work seeks to avoid replicating the same tropes used by dictators. Instead, they challenge, complicate, and subvert normative ideas of the child.

While the dissertation diverges from queer theory in key ways, that discipline's interpretive frameworks and methods are integral to its analysis. It adapts from this robust tradition in order to productively build on its framework, while acknowledging the important ways in which it does not properly belong to that tradition. In drawing on multiple critical frameworks, this dissertation ultimately attempts to synthesize them in a way that can meaningfully speak back to all of them.

## **Overview and Chapter Breakdown**

The work of Christa Wolf, Herta Müller, and Jenny Erpenbeck adds a fascinating dimension to studies of the child because these three authors deliberately decouple the child from that with which it is so often associated—futura. Instead of standing in for a bright, sunny tomorrow, they use narratives of girlhood to narrate indoctrination, social decay, and state collapse. Rather than entering the society for which they had been raised, these girls enter adulthood at dramatic moments of political and social rupture, finding themselves suddenly ensconced in a world for which they were never prepared. Wolf and Erpenbeck grapple directly with the experience of state collapse. Müller deals more with growing up in the aftermath of such upheavals (her parents' generation's experience with fascism and Soviet labor camps); being socialized for a 'doomed' yet nonetheless oppressive way of life; and entering adulthood as an ethnic minority in a hostile state.

In all three cases, the distance created via state collapse or social decay reveals once-hidden dynamics of childhood, and an understanding of how children are raised to be a particular

kind of citizen subject. All three authors dwell at length on the strangeness and uncanniness of normative childhood. Their narratives become opportunities to reflect on children's socialization into obedience and conformity; affective labor; kinship formations; trauma; shame; complicity; and political life. Wolf, Müller, and Erpenbeck are all invested in complicating our understanding of the child, and making us aware of the ramifications of the emotional burdens we knowingly and unknowingly place on children.

However, these authors have been chosen not only for their different historical contexts and their choice of subject matter, but because they employ a diverse range of formal techniques. Their attention to form reflects their shared desire to resist representational conventions associated with authoritarian power structures, but each author takes a distinct approach to this problem. Wolf employs a highly self-conscious style, switching between pronouns and timelines, in order to deny the possibility that childhood can be recovered, as well as to undercut the historical narrative of heroic resistance to Nazism promoted by the East German government. Müller takes an opposite approach, eschewing the kind of narration that might explain or interpret events for the reader. Instead, her work is often comprised of image-heavy scenes without explicit transitions from a narrator, forcing the reader to make sense of the story, imitating the way children experience the world. Erpenbeck crafts fable-like narratives that emphasize the uncanny, rendering adults' apparently benign idealizations of normative childhood grotesque and tragic.

While all the works under consideration here have child protagonists, none features a child *narrator*. Christa Wolf narrates her childhood in the third person, as does Herta Müller in *Herztier*; in works that feature first-person narration (Müller's "Niederungen" and Erpenbeck's *Wörterbuch*), each protagonist is revealed to be an adult looking back on her childhood.

Repeatedly, we find an insistence on an “impossibility” similar to the one Rose reads into *Peter Pan*: all three authors refuse the reader the illusion of complete access to the child’s inner life. Instead, we find an emphasis on the fallibility and malleability of memory, which results in a self-conscious distancing of the present-tense adult from the child she once was. Although each author takes a different narrative approach, all three place the child just out of reach, emphasizing that, to the adult, something of the child is always irretrievable.

Irretrievable though the past may be, these writers also refuse the impulse to write childhood through the rosy lens of nostalgia. Their representations of children go against the grain in part because they want to resist the idyllic, idealized conventions so closely associated with young children and childhood. The authoritarian context is important here: intensely concerned with complicity, Wolf, Müller, and Erpenbeck focus their narratives on scrutinizing how children are taught to conform to and even revere repressive social systems; often, their protagonists are haunted by the question of just how much responsibility the child bears for her actions and obedience. Authoritarianism is a crucial thread in all of these narratives, but it is not solely responsible for children’s upbringing. Rather, the authors posit that childrearing practices in fact enables the rise and perpetuation of authoritarianism, in that it conditions the child that love is contingent upon obedience.<sup>67</sup> For these authors, then, examinations of childhood are at once opportunities to sift through the experiences that begin to constitute the individual self, and

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<sup>67</sup> This theme often recurs in psychoanalytic readings of children’s literature and early childhood education practices, particularly in the German context. For arguments about the links between fairy tales, “schwarze Pädagogie,” and the rise of fascism, see Zornado, chapter three; for arguments about the relationship between parental cruelty and the rise of Hitler, see Alice Miller, *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-Rearing and the Roots of Violence*, trans. Hildegarde Hannum and Hunter Hannum (1983; New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 3 – 91, 142 – 97. The links between pedagogy and the rise of fascism were so prevalent that they led to an intense interest in alternative pedagogic practices among the New Left during the 1960s and 70s [*Kinderläden*], influenced especially by Wilhelm Reich’s theories of childhood sexuality. These experiments, however, were controversial and the subject of much criticism. See Dagmar Herzog, *Sex After Fascism: Memory and Morality in Twentieth-Century Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), chapter four.

to analyze the place of these individual and interpersonal dynamics contribute to, sustain, and reproduce larger social and political dynamics.

Each subsequent chapter focuses on one author and how her prose self-consciously constructs the child, the intervention she makes into discourses about childhood and authoritarian politics, and the narrative strategies she uses to achieve these ends.

*Chapter One: "Zu Welchem Ende?" Writing the Child in Christa Wolf's Kindheitsmuster*

Chapter One analyzes the narrative strategies at work in *Kindheitsmuster*, Christa Wolf's 1976 monumental work of autobiographical prose. *Kindheitsmuster* at once excavates the narrator's formative years under the Nazi regime and critiques contemporary East German narratives about complicity and heroism. The chapter argues that the child plays a pivotal yet heretofore underexamined role in Wolf's intervention.

Beginning with an examination of the political context of Wolf's writing, the chapter addresses Wolf's rejection of the GDR's founding myth, namely that the progenitors of the Communist state heroically resisted fascism, and all the fascists went on to found capitalist West Germany. Not only did this myth not speak to Wolf's personal experience, but she found herself increasingly bothered by the fact that young people could not comprehend the origins and experience of Nazism. *Kindheitsmuster* resists the GDR's historical narrative through a deeply personal exploration of the author-narrator's childhood, in which acts of heroism are markedly absent.

*Kindheitsmuster* offers a rich opportunity for reading the child because it so self-consciously engages with the problem of fictionalizing the child and remembering the past. From the very first page, the narrator performs an elaborate meta-reflection on the problems relating

her story, choosing to refer to her adult self in the second person (“du”) and her childhood self in the third person (“es” or “sie;” she names the child she once was “Nelly”). Echoing the splitting of the psyche after a traumatic experience, this choice foregrounds the distance between the present and the past the narrator is attempting to work through. As much as she wants to understand the past, however, the narrator is haunted by her instrumentalization and figuration of Nelly. The chapter considers these narrative choices and how they affect Wolf’s portrayal of the child. It also compares the aesthetic Wolf’s narrator claims to desire with the strategies the narrative actually uses, arguing that the circumstances of the book’s publication and political context have colored the book’s reception, and hence a clear-eyed assessment of the full range of narrative techniques Wolf employs.

Unlike many previous studies of *Kindheitsmuster*, the chapter analyzes the considerable emphasis Wolf places on writing the inner lives of children, and especially girls. Using minor characters from both *Kindheitsmuster* and Wolf’s celebrated novel, *Nachdenken über Christa T.* (1968), as a point of comparison, it highlights the differences in her portrayal of boys and girls, and how gender shapes the upbringing of each. It also argues that the minor characters reveal the ways in which Nelly feels pressure to conform, not through something like overt ‘peer pressure,’ but by eliciting a desire not to stand out or be marked as ‘abnormal.’ This move complicates scholarship on gendered constructions of the child by reframing normativity and rationality in the context of complicity with fascism.

Finally, the chapter also adds to scholarship on the construction of children’s innocence, arguing that in the context of authoritarianism, innocence actually renders the child dangerous to adults. *Kindheitsmuster* gives us an example of a hyperpatriotic, indoctrinated young boy who murders his family just before the arrival of the Red Army. In shaping this boy into its ideal



subject, the Nazi regime disrupts the nuclear family (a formation of normative kinship it otherwise sought to promote) by making itself the first object of the citizen's loyalty. The very quality that parents so value in children—their obedience—is also a source of legitimate adult fear.

*Chapter Two: Consumption and the Reproduction of Social Norms: Reading the Child in Herta Müller's Prose*

Chapter Two moves in geographical focus away from Germany and turns its attention to Communist Romania and the writings of Herta Müller. Belonging to an ethnic German minority in Banat Swabia, Romania, Müller's experience and writings are shaped by the experience of being an outsider. Her first language was German, not Romanian, something which rendered her immediately suspicious to the Romanian government. Following her refusal to collaborate, the Romanian secret police persecuted Müller relentlessly, even after her emigration to West Germany in the 1980s. Unlike Wolf, who believed in socialism's potential to bring about a more just society even though the GDR represented a corruption of these ideals, Müller outright rejects utopian promises of any variety.

The chapter shows how Müller uses the 'mind of a child' as a narrative device and explores what role it plays in her essays and fiction. In *Der Teufel sitzt im Spiegel* (1991), Müller plays on the reader's expectations about children's modes of perception in order to illustrate how the mind organizes experience. At the same time, she consciously repudiates anything to do with the "magical" side of childhood, suggesting that, while there are differences, there is a greater continuity between children's and adults' ways of thinking than most would admit. The child's perception of un-reality, she writes, is not precious but terrifying; she recalls the desperate need

to conceal her inner life from others in order fit in to the homogenous world of the village where she grew up.

The chapter furthermore shows how Müller's use of the child complicates existing scholarship. In *Niederungen* (1982/4), the collection's title story offers insights about the child's socialization into everyday violence and conformity. "Niederungen" provides an opportunity for examining of the changing economic status of the child in rural Romania, which complements existing scholarship on the child-as-consumer in the West. It also examines the implications of innocence, and the ways in which the child's innocence and protection estrange her from the adults around her.

*Niederungen* also provides opportunity for a consideration of another frequent topic of scholarship on children, namely play and games. In Müller, the qualities usually associated with children's play—fantasy, imagination, creativity—are strikingly absent. Instead, games mimic and prepare village children, like the protagonist of "Niederungen," for the labor that will occupy them the rest of their lives. In other instances, games reproduce and perpetuate ethnic prejudices and reinforce a sense of group identity. For Müller, games and play signify a process of acclimatization, and add to the pressures of conformity.

Finally, the chapter examines the Müller's treatment of the effects of Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu's aggressive pro-natalist politics. Müller writes extensively about these policies, both in her essays and in her 1994 novel, *Herztier*: they resulted in both a generation of unwanted children, and a breakdown in trust among women, and between women and doctors. In *Herztier*, Müller points out one of the fundamental problems of Ceaușescu's natalism: although the state desires children, it does not have the resources to support them. The late 1970s and 1980s were characterized by starvation and a dearth of consumer goods, stemming directly from

the dictator's decision to prioritize the payment of foreign debts. Like "Niederungen," this chapter argues, *Herztier* dwells on the interplay between violence and sustenance, survival and complicity. Müller's depiction of Romanian children, the chapter argues, reveals how violence and repression can become normalized and internalized.

*Chapter Three: Childlike: Performing Childhood in Jenny Erpenbeck's Geschichte vom alten Kind and Wörterbuch*

Chapter Three returns to Germany and the writings of Jenny Erpenbeck. Born in 1967, Jenny Erpenbeck grew up in the GDR, only to witness its collapse and subsequent reintegration into West Germany in her early adult years. This chapter focuses on two works of fiction, *Geschichte vom alten Kind* (1999) and *Wörterbuch* (2005), which feature adult women pretending to be children. *Geschichte* is a Kafkaesque tale of a girl who ends up in an orphanage; a grotesque outsider for most of her tenure there, she ultimately revealed to be a thirty-year-old woman masquerading as a child. Similarly fabulist but more melancholy in tone, *Wörterbuch* is set in an unnamed Latin American dictatorship. Over the course of the book, the protagonist discovers that her father, a member of the *junta*, tortured and killed her real parents. In both cases, the protagonists have experienced trauma, and it is likely that their behavior stems from repressive mechanisms. The chapter looks at the narrative strategies Erpenbeck uses to construct the illusion of "childishness" in each case, something which has until now been largely overlooked in the scholarship on her work.

The chapter analyzes the ways in which Erpenbeck codes her adult protagonists as children, and how those narrative devices reflect idealized notions about children. *Geschichte* takes adult fascination with children's purity and innocence to extremes: the "altes Kind"

becomes physically ill at any sign of sexuality. The “altes Kind” takes the idealization of the child to extreme lengths to show their disconnection from the lived realities of children. In the case of *Wörterbuch*, the narrator’s adoptive father is obsessed with his daughter’s purity. The chapter reads his repeated equation of children with futurity alongside Edelman, arguing that the adoptive father makes the same rhetorical moves outlined in *No Future*, coming to stand in for the paternalistic military regime as a whole.

The chapter also discusses Erpenbeck’s use of language and her portrayal of the “childlike” mind. It argues that in both works, an inability to understand figurative language stands in for “childish” thinking or lack of understanding. The old child takes figures of speech literally and attempts to fit in by mimicking her peers. The narrator of *Wörterbuch* repeats overheard language and appears to confuse dreams with reality. At the same time as the narratives use language to construct the illusion of childishness, it uses that very language to unsettle.

Both women’s attempts at innocence, the chapter argues, entail a degree of denial about the extent to which they are complicit and/or beneficiaries of the systems to which they belong. The issue of complicity opens up the question of what role the adult investment in childhood plays for Erpenbeck. In *Geschichte*, the old child wants desperately to believe in the simplicity and security adults associate with childhood; in *Wörterbuch*, the narrator desires to return to a place of pure language, prior to its tainting by her adoptive parents. In both books, the characters are misfits in the worlds they inhabit, and compulsively return to childhood as an idealized space in which they may find familiarity, if not freedom or happiness; in each case, Erpenbeck demonstrates that childhood is neither ideal nor a time to which one can truly return.

## Chapter One:

### “Zu welchem Ende?” Writing the Child in Christa Wolf’s *Kindheitsmuster*

Midway through Christa Wolf’s *Kindheitsmuster* (1976), the narrator pauses to reflect on the burden she has placed on the “character” of Nelly, the child she once was: “Ist es nicht Selbsttäuschung, zu denken, dieses Kind bewege sich aus sich selbst heraus, nach seinen eigenen Gesetzen? Leben in vorgegebenen Figuren – das ist das Problem. [...] Das Kind, sobald es schnurpst, ist dein Vehikel. Zu welchem Ende?”<sup>1</sup> Nelly “schnurpst,” an expression the narrator’s father, Bruno Jordan, liked to use “sobald etwas von alleine lief.”<sup>2</sup> Nelly, the child, can “run on her own,” like a machine, in order to become the narrator’s “vehicle.” But the narrator is unsettled by her use of the child, even if that child is a version of herself; it reminds her too much of the very childhood she describes, in which children were coopted into the project of building a National Socialist future.

Although the narrator’s project in this book is an exploration of her childhood and adolescence under the Third Reich, her discomfort with the endeavor always interrupts the narrated past and insistently calls attention to itself. Narratively, she splits her own consciousness in two, naming her childhood self “Nelly” and describing her(self) in the third person, while referring to her adult self in the second person. Yet even though the book sifts through the narrator’s own memories, she is haunted by how the use of “vorgegebene[] Figuren” seems unavoidable in the writing of literature. Besides relying on preexisting tropes, literary figures create the illusion of autonomy: the child appears to move of her own accord, by her own rules (“nach seinen eigenen Gesetzen”).

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<sup>1</sup> Christa Wolf, *Kindheitsmuster*, vol. 5 of *Werke in zwölf Bänden*, ed. Sonja Hilzinger (Munich: Luchterhand, 2000), 308. First published in 1976 by Aufbau Verlag. Abbreviated hereafter as *KM*.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

As a writer, Christa Wolf was likewise disturbed by other tropes perpetuated by the German Democratic Republic, where she lived as an adult—namely, the Socialist narrative of the Nazi period. According to official interpretations, the fascist era was populated by two kinds of people: fascists (the eventual progenitors of the West German state), and heroic resisters (who, naturally, went on to build the GDR). In an interview with Hans Kaufmann three years prior to the publication of *Kindheitsmuster* (on which she had at that point been working for several years), Wolf described her frustrations with official GDR narratives:

gerade dieser Widerstand (den auch die Beobachtung signalisiert, daß bestimmte mit unserer Kindheit zusammenhängende Themen in Gesprächen fast niemals berührt werden) deutet darauf hin, wie radioaktiv dieser Stoff noch ist. Haben wir uns nicht vielleicht deshalb angewöhnt, den Faschismus als ein ‘Phänomen’ zu beschreiben, das außerhalb von uns existiert hat und aus der Welt war, nachdem man seine Machtzentren und Organisationsformen zerschlagen hatte?<sup>3</sup>

The GDR’s narrative made fascism into a discreet phenomenon caused by external circumstances, and could therefore be cleanly excised from the body politic through the implementation of state socialism. But this interpretation left no room for a consideration of the lingering psychic effects of childhood under fascism for Wolf’s generation. Born in 1929, Wolf and her cohort spent their formative years under National Socialism; that is to say, for many years, Wolf’s generation believed that the Nazi state was normal, and that as German citizens, they would carry on its dictates into the future. The experience of fascism was such a fundamental part of her socialization, education, and upbringing that Wolf could not accept that the idea that her generation could simply start over as a *tabula rasa*.

Furthermore, Wolf saw the deficits in the GDR’s narrative when she observed the younger generation’s reaction to received history. East German youth, despite the education they

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<sup>3</sup> Christa Wolf, interview by Hans Kaufmann, “Subjektive Authentizität. Gespräch mit Hans Kaufmann,” in *Christa Wolf. Essays / Gespräche / Reden / Briefe 1959 - 1974*, vol. 4 of *Werke*, ed. by Sonja Hilzinger (Munich: Luchterhand, 1999), 415. Interview abbreviated hereafter as “Subjektive Authentizität,” volume as *Werke* 4.

received about the preconditions for and origins of fascism, still couldn't comprehend how people could come to subject themselves to Hitler and the Nazis. Wolf understood this not as the younger generation's failure to understand what happened, but as the state's failure to communicate the truth of their national history. "Aber sie [junge Menschen] haben das Recht, das zu verstehen," Wolf said, "und wir haben die Pflicht, ihnen etwas darüber zu sagen—soweit wir können."<sup>4</sup> For Wolf, the responsibilities of her generation were clear, but the final clause of her otherwise firm pronouncement is telling: "soweit wir können." *Kindheitsmuster* is Wolf's attempt to explore and understand the past as far as she can, to probe the limits of what can and cannot be remembered, told, and explained. At the center of this exploration is that ambivalent vehicle, Nelly, the figure of the child.

**“Was unsere Generation erlebt hat, wird nie wieder eine Generation erleben:”**

### ***Kindheitsmuster* in Context**

Wolf began thinking about the project that would become *Kindheitsmuster* as early as 1964.<sup>5</sup> For Wolf, the narrative of the heroic antifascist resistor rested on the same fallacy as the concept of a *Stunde Null* following the capitulation of the Nazi state. The generation of children who grew up under the Third Reich had a markedly different experience than those who were already adults when the National Socialist regime came to power in 1933. This experience, she believed, was historically and socially unique:

Was unsere Generation erlebt hat, wird nie wieder eine Generation erleben: in der einen Gesellschaft aufzuwachsen, erzogen, geprägt zu werden und der anderen - in unserer - die

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Sonja Hilzinger, "Entstehung, Veröffentlichung und Rezeption," in *KM*, 647.

Möglichkeit zu einer an die gesellschaftlichen Wurzeln gehenden Kritik und Selbstkritik zu haben, zum Denken, Verstehen, Handeln kommen.<sup>6</sup>

The question of uniqueness aside,<sup>7</sup> Wolf's generation was raised for and shaped by one state but had been 'reformed' and given the ability to participate in and shape the project of socialism—at least in theory. Though she expressed gratitude for the second chance her generation had been given by the GDR, the afterlife of her upbringing continued to concern her. Indeed, Wolf often characterized her generation in terms of maturity and arrested development: "Es ist ein großes Thema, den Reifeprozess dieser meiner Generation zu verfolgen, auch die Gründe zu suchen, wenn er ins Stocken kam."<sup>8</sup> *Kindheitsmuster* represents the culmination of her explorations of how the Nazi state interrupted the "Reifeprozess" of an entire generation of German children.

Published in 1976, *Kindheitsmuster* straddles multiple genres. The book draws heavily on Wolf's childhood and on a 1971 trip she made to Gorów Wielkopolski, Poland (formerly Landsberg), the town where she grew up. The bulk of the text remembers and reflects on the narrator's childhood memories of the beginning of the Nazi regime, the escalation of persecution, the Second World War, and finally the collapse of the Third Reich and her family's flight west. Yet it is never only the past that concerns Wolf. In *Lesen und Schreiben*, Wolf writes that the author of literature "ist tief beunruhigt über die Zukunft der Menschheit, weil sie ihm sympathisch ist. Er liebt es, auf der Welt zu sein, und er liebt die vielen Formen, in denen menschliches Leben sich zeigt."<sup>9</sup> *Kindheitsmuster* grapples with and intertwines both the future

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<sup>6</sup> Wolf, "Subjektive Authentizität," 422.

<sup>7</sup> See Introduction.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 414. Cf. Christa Wolf, *Lesen und Schreiben*, in *Werke 4*, ed. by Sonja Hilzinger (Munich: Luchterhand, 1999), 251. Abbreviated hereafter as *LS*.

<sup>9</sup> Wolf, *LS*, 278.



and the present, repeatedly referencing, for instance, the Vietnam War and the Pinochet coup in Chile. Past and present, the book argues, are not easily cordoned off from one another.

While references to current events explicitly critique the imperialist ambitions of the United States, much of the text's implicit critique targets the GDR. Quoting an unnamed "berühmter Italiener," the narrator writes that "[d]ie Menschen des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts [...] seien sich selbst und einander gram, weil sie ihre Fähigkeit bewiesen haben, unter Diktaturen zu leben."<sup>10</sup> Like many of her pronouncements about ordinary people's capacity to accommodate themselves to authoritarianism, the quotation can be read on two levels: one describing the Nazi regime of the past, and the other, the contemporary state of affairs in the GDR. *Kindheitsmuster* excavates both the complex motives hidden by the GDR's official narrative of fascism and how those patterns have repeated themselves in the present. The narrator asks, "Wie sind wir geworden, wie wir sind?"<sup>11</sup> The present tense of the second clause suggests that she is concerned not only with how children were socialized for accommodation to authority, but also how those patterns continue in the GDR, and in the West.

Even though *Kindheitsmuster* was written during a period of relative liberalization (hinted at the book by the ease with which the narrator and her family acquire travel visas to Poland), Wolf's disillusionment with the GDR's ideology and the SED's *real existierender Sozialismus* had been growing for some time.<sup>12</sup> The extent to which Wolf's work can be read as

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<sup>10</sup> Wolf, *KM*, 250-1.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 534. In *Kindheitsmuster*, this is presented as a response to an interview question about the book (and an alternate title for the book). Wolf herself used this exact phrasing in an actual interview prior to the book's publication. See Christa Wolf, "Erfahrungsmuster. Diskussion zu *Kindheitsmuster*," in vol. 8 of *Werke*, 54.

<sup>12</sup> On the brief period of liberalization in the GDR and its impact on literature, see Wolfgang Emmerich, *Kleine Literaturgeschichte der DDR. Erweiterte Neuauflage*, 4th ed. (Leipzig: Gustav Kiepenhauer, 2009), 240-52. On Wolf's growing disillusionment with the GDR, especially in relationship to *Christa T.*, see e.g. *ibid.*, 207-8. Wolf's criticism of the GDR would continue, particularly after the expatriation of Wolf Biermann shortly after the publication of *Kindheitsmuster*; see *ibid.*, 252-63.

dissenting or complicit has been much debated, particularly during the *Literaturstreit* following the publication of *Was bleibt* (1990) after the fall of the Berlin Wall.<sup>13</sup> With regard to *Kindheitsmuster* in particular, Julia Hell reads the book in terms of its relationship to antifascism as the founding myth of the East German state, pointing out the ways in which the book either challenges or reinforces that myth; Anke Pinkert argues that Wolf's critique in this book constitutes a kind of "soft dissidence," which ultimately does not challenge the antifascist narrative (and by extension does not challenge the GDR or SED).<sup>14</sup>

In so many of these debates, Wolf has come to stand in for larger questions about East German society and intellectuals' relationships to power, raising the stakes of the verdict. (Indeed, the collection of essays documenting the *Literaturstreit* is quite literally titled, "*Es geht nicht um Christa Wolf*.") For example, Pinkert contends that *Kindheitsmuster* establishes a kind of symbiotic relationship between Wolf's criticism and the East German state; per this argument, "Wolf's particular model of dissidence relied on the preservation of things as they were."<sup>15</sup> This rather cynical take on *Kindheitsmuster* rests on the interpretation that Wolf has 're-written' the narrative of antifascism, albeit with more empathy for Jewish victims.<sup>16</sup> I would argue, however, that Wolf has not rewritten that myth; instead, she has written mythic heroism out of her narrative entirely. The project of her book undercuts the foundational narrative of the GDR,

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<sup>13</sup> For an overview of the *Literaturstreit* and reactions to Wolf (including the accusation that she had been a *Staatsdichterin*), see Andreas Huyssen, "After the Wall: The Failure of German Intellectuals," in "German Reunification," ed. by Stephen Brockmann and Anson Rabinbach, special issue, *New German Critique*, no. 52 (1991): 122–43; and Anz, Thomas, ed. "*Es geht nicht um Christa Wolf*." *Der Literaturstreit im vereinten Deutschland*. (Munich: Spangenberg, 1991).

<sup>14</sup> On the relationship between *Kindheitsmuster* and the trope of the "antifascist/Communist body," see Julia Hell, *Post-Fascist Fantasies: Psychoanalysis, History, and the Literature of East Germany* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 17-19, 200-12; on "soft dissidence," see Pinkert, Anke. "Pleasures of Fear: Antifascist Myth, Holocaust, and Soft Dissidence in Christa Wolf's *Kindheitsmuster*." *The German Quarterly* 76, no. 1 (2003): 25–37.

<sup>15</sup> Pinkert, 34.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

instead confronting the ways in which the citizenry acted in complicity with the Nazi state. She rejects the basis of the SED's legitimacy, which can indeed be understood as an act of resistance.

Furthermore, Wolf has replaced the heroic antifascist resistor with something like his opposite: the Nazi girl child. As Hell argues, the figure of the antifascist resistor is identified with the adult male body, usually a paternal figure.<sup>17</sup> By contrast, Nelly's story is not heroic, even if her story belongs to the genre of "epic" prose.<sup>18</sup> She does not resist, nor does she know anyone who does. In telling Nelly's story, Wolf erases any trace of the official history her East German readers would have been familiar with. Instead, she tries to dismantle this myth by transforming a symbol of the future (the child) from a "preexisting figure" into a person who survives the "end of the world"—that is, the defeat of Nazism.<sup>19</sup> In doing so, however, she runs up against the limits of language, memory, and narrative prose. It is the ethics of literature that concern Wolf, far more than delegitimizing the East German state. In a parenthetical aside, the narrator recalls being asked about the importance of literature and answering that "jener Apparat, der die Aufnahme und Verarbeitung von Wirklichkeit zu tätigen hat, von Literatur geformt wird; bei Nelly war es—sie wußte es nicht—schwer beschädigt."<sup>20</sup> *Kindheitsmuster* attempts to wrestle with the damage wrought by Nelly's upbringing through the medium of literature; for all of literature's imperfections, it is the only way she can recreate the construction of the core of the self and the formation of moral consciousness. This move, it should be noted, was not well-received in the GDR upon the book's publication; as one East German reviewer put it, "Um ein

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<sup>17</sup> Hell, 25-36.

<sup>18</sup> See below.

<sup>19</sup> Wolf, *KM*, 468.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 534.

Nazi zu sein, mußte man entweder dumm sein oder schlecht,” thereby either missing or refusing to acknowledge the entire mission of the book.<sup>21</sup>

When the first edition of *Kindheitsmuster* appeared in West Germany in (1977, Luchterhand), the title page of that edition contained the subtitle “Roman,” which had not appeared in the East German version; this addition—the only difference between the two versions—leading to markedly different expectations of the text’s content.<sup>22</sup> The literary and cultural context of the Federal Republic further shaped the book’s reception there. In a speech honoring Wolf for winning the Bremer Literaturpreis, Wolfgang Emmerich described how *Kindheitsmuster* emerged on the literary scene at a disturbing moment of “rehabilitation” for the Nazi regime and some of its former members, as well as an increasingly visible Neo-Nazi presence in public life.<sup>23</sup> Many people had furthermore relegated the project of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* to the realm of obsolescence, deeming literature concerned with the NS period to be “unzeitgemäß.”<sup>24</sup> *Kindheitsmuster* therefore provided a welcome continuation of that working-through, as well as an opportunity to demonstrate the absence of any such equivalent project in the GDR.

Indeed, Emmerich characterizes the book as something of a ‘teachable moment’ for the GDR, which he argues turned its back on the lessons of the past in its zealous pursuit of a socialist future.<sup>25</sup> Invoking Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich’s seminal book on the trauma

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<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Wolfgang Emmerich, “Der Kampf um die Erinnerung. Laudatio auf Christa Wolf anlässlich der Verleihung des Bremer Literaturpreises 1977,” *Christa Wolf Materialienbuch*, ed. Klaus Sauer (Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 1979), 115.

<sup>22</sup> Hilzinger, 653. The text of *KM* in the collected *Werke* is based on the Aufbau Verlag edition.

<sup>23</sup> Emmerich, “Der Kampf um die Erinnerung,” 112.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 112-5. Cf. Debbie Pinfold’s analysis of post-*Wende* constructions of the GDR as an immature “Mündel” that needed to be instructed by the more mature West. Debbie Pinfold, “‘Das Mündel will Vormund sein’: The GDR State as Child,” *German Life and Letters* 64, no. 2 (2011): 283–304.

of the NS period for the German populace, *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern* (1967), Emmerich argues that, through *Kindheitsmuster*, “lehrt [Wolf] ihre Leser, wie nötig es ist, Trauerfähigkeit zu erwerben.”<sup>26</sup> In other words, the book provides East Germans with an opportunity to learn what West Germans already know about the need to come to terms with the realities of Nazism. In a move very similar to how critics received Wolf’s earlier novel, *Nachdenken über Christa T.* (1968), Emmerich frames *Kindheitsmuster* as formally closer to Western rather than East German literature:

Der Kampf um die Erinnerung, eine Recherche der geschilderten Art kann auch als Literatur nicht anders vonstatten gehen denn als langwieriger, oft gestörter, durchaus nicht stetiger Prozeß. Hegels Satz, daß das das Ganze das Wahre ist, gilt hier durchaus nicht; vielmehr der Satz von Adorno: ‘Das Ganze ist das Unwahre.’ So spiegelt auch das Ende des Buches seinem Leser keine endgültige Bewältigung und Erledigung des Themas vor, die es nicht geben kann.<sup>27</sup>

By invoking Adorno’s *Minima Moralia* (1951), Emmerich aligns Wolf with the critical tradition of Western Marxism and the aesthetics of literary Modernism—that is, modes of thought positioned as antithetical to the GDR’s governance and preferred aesthetics. As we shall see, Emmerich’s appraisal of Wolf is not completely accurate, colored as it is by both FRG politics and relations between East and West Germany.

### **“Ich, du, sie:” Narrating Self and Past in *Kindheitsmuster***

Wolf herself tended to speak about her writing in terms of “prose” rather than autobiography or novel. *Kindheitsmuster* arguably belongs to what she termed, after Bertolt Brecht, “epic prose.” (Already the association with Brecht complicates Emmerich’s alignment of

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<sup>26</sup> Emmerich, “Der Kampf um die Erinnerung,” 116.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 117. On the reception of *Christa T.*, see Emmerich, *Kleine Literaturgeschichte*, 207-10.

Wolf with Adorno, who famously repudiated the Brechtian model of “politically engaged” art, especially in his 1962 essay, “Engagement.”<sup>28</sup>) In her 1968 essay, *Lesen und Schreiben*, she described her dissatisfaction with “novelistic” [*romanhaft*] writing, which she associates with the tradition of bourgeois realism; this kind of writing, she argues, too often thoughtlessly reuses the same conventions and narratives [*Fabeln*].<sup>29</sup> By contrast, epic prose should forge new paths into the innermost core of the reader: “Die epische Prosa sollte eine Gattung sein, die es unternimmt, auf noch ungebahnten Wegen in das Innerste dieses Menschen da, des Prosaesers, einzudringen. In das innerste Innere, dorthin, wo der Kern der Persönlichkeit sich bildet und festigt.”<sup>30</sup> Wolf’s description of epic prose resonates with Brecht’s concept of the *Lehrstück*. Often mistranslated and misinterpreted as a “didactic play,” Brecht understood the *Lehrstück* as an opportunity for participants to learn through the process of re-enactment (this form of drama is not, as has often been claimed, simply a vehicle for the author to deliver a message).<sup>31</sup>

I would argue that this sort of learning-through-process also characterizes Wolf’s *Kindheitsmuster*. The book meticulously shows the narrator’s process of reconstructing and

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<sup>28</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, “Engagement,” in *Noten zur Literatur*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (1962; Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), 409–30.

<sup>29</sup> Wolf, *LS*, 260-1. Wolf uses the term *Fabeln* to mean stories or narratives in an archetypal sense; her critique of the novel and of bourgeois realism is that they too often recycle the same stories, not necessarily a wholesale rejection of “plot-centered narration,” as Myra Love has suggested. See Myra N. Love’s discussion of the Kaufmann interview (“Subjektive Authentizität”), in *Christa Wolf: Literature and the Conscience of History*, (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), 66-7.

<sup>30</sup> Wolf, *LS*, 268. Some scholars have traced Wolf’s understanding of Brecht and argued that by the 1970s she had begun to turn away from him as a model, instead looking increasingly to Ingeborg Bachmann and her understanding of a search for a new kind of language. Nonetheless, I believe that *Kindheitsmuster* can still be characterized as epic prose, and that Wolf’s use of the term and understanding of the genre she herself defined can be understood independently of her more specific relationship to Brecht’s legacy. See Sara Lennox, “Christa Wolf and Ingeborg Bachmann: Difficulties of Writing the Truth,” in *Responses to Christa Wolf: Critical Essays*, ed. by Marilyn Sibley Fries, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 128 – 48; and Rechten, Renate. “Relations of Productions? Christa Wolf’s Extended Engagement with the Legacy of Bertolt Brecht.” In *Bertolt Brecht: Centenary Essays*, ed. by Steve Giles and Rodney Livingstone, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), 196–210.

<sup>31</sup> On the *Lehrstück* as “learning play,” and how Cold War politics have affected the reception of Brecht, see David Bathrick and Andreas Huyssen, “Producing Revolution: Heiner Müller’s *Mausier* as Learning Play,” *New German Critique*, no. 8 (1976): 110–21.

learning from the past. By formally structuring the book around that process and its messiness—rather than a more straightforward “*romanhaft*” narrative of childhood—Wolf also models this kind of self-examination for the reader. *Kindheitsmuster* attempts to reach the reader by finding a way into the innermost part of the writer and examining the how the core constituent parts of her personality came to be.

### *Splitting the Narrative Self*

In addition to its Brechtian roots, the book’s exploration of childhood rests on an approach familiar from psychoanalysis: namely, the belief that “the emotional discovery and emotional acceptance of the truth in the individual and unique history of [one’s] childhood” will effect a psychic change in the present.<sup>32</sup> *Kindheitsmuster* begins with the writer’s hope that an exploration of her fraught childhood will ultimately lead to a kind of closure and wholeness. The book’s final sentence is an answer to the question of whether the narrator has truly recovered and understood her childhood self, and contains the appearance of psychic reintegration: the narrator speaks with the pronoun *ich* rather than referring to herself as *du*. However, the promise of that reintegration is undercut by the content of that sentence: “Ich weiß es nicht.”<sup>33</sup> Though the *ich* pronoun seems to indicate the reintegration of the narrator’s ego [*das Ich*], the end of that process has not come with the intellectual or emotional certainty she hoped that exploration would bring. Just as complete reintegration is an ideal that can never be achieved, the lack of closure once again highlights the book’s Brechtian emphasis on process over goal.

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<sup>32</sup> Alice Miller, *The Drama of the Gifted Child: The Search for the True Self*, trans. Ruth Ward, 3rd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 3.

<sup>33</sup> Wolf, *KM*, 594.

The book is an extended inquiry into the formation of moral consciousness (the development of the “Kern der Persönlichkeit”). It also explores the problem of truthfully representing that development, given both the gaps in the narrator’s memory, and the temptation to forget or ignore how affected that process was by the rise of the Third Reich. Just as she searches for new narrative techniques to find “noch ungebahnten Wegen” into the psychic effects of fascism on her generation, so too does she search for a way of depicting Nelly that breaks out of the usual conventions associated with the child. The narrator’s search for a mode of writing that doesn’t fall into “vorgegebene[] Figuren” is a halting one, repeatedly demonstrating how easy it is to slip into “novelistic” [*romanhaft*] conventions. The difficulties of representing the narrator’s fraught personal history point to the fact that *Kindheitsmuster* is, at its heart, a reckoning with the act of writing as much as it is an exploration of the past. The struggle to accurately and truthfully render Nelly’s coming of age and the development of her self-awareness—to render her as an independent, singular entity rather than a figure—reflects the narrator’s larger struggle with the medium of prose. In *Kindheitsmuster*, the figure of the child functions as a cipher for narrator’s anxieties about writing literature.

The book performs an elaborate oscillation between the sort of meta-reflection cited at the outset of this chapter and more *romanhaft* prose. The book opens with a series of “false starts.” The narrator enumerates the possible ways she considered beginning the book: Nelly Jordan associating herself for the first time with the pronoun *ich*; Nelly playing with her dolls; the Jordan family store and home.<sup>34</sup> But the narrator’s conscience forbids her from continuing in this vein: “Verfälschen!” she declares.<sup>35</sup> Despite this self-admonishment, the narrator

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 16-8.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 19.



nonetheless sees fit to incorporate several pages of those ‘original’ scenes into the book itself, sketching them in physical and emotional detail. Such scenes appear throughout the book, interspersed with qualifications, repudiations, explorations of the nature of memory, and ruminations on political events of the 1970s.

From the first page, the narrator of *Kindheitsmuster* others the child she once was, beginning at the formal level. After months of false starts, she tells us, she faces a dilemma: “sprachlos bleiben oder in der dritten Person leben [...]. Das eine unmöglich, unheimlich das andere.”<sup>36</sup> Unable and unwilling to keep silent, the narrator opts for the *unheimlich*. As Freud writes, the discomfort of the *unheimlich* is most intense when its opposite, the *heimlich*, is also present.<sup>37</sup> Yet silence is impossible for the narrator, who feels an ethical imperative to face her past. As a result, she must choose the *unheimlich*: Nelly unsettles her because while she is familiar, she is also an imperfect and artificial representation of who the narrator once was. Nelly’s status as the narrator’s “vehicle” or marionette furthermore echoes some of the uncanny objects named in Freud’s essay: “kunstvolle[] Puppen und Automaten.”<sup>38</sup> These objects closely resemble people, but are in fact lifeless, and animated by unseen powers—much like a literary figure or a character in a novel.

As an aesthetic response, the narrator refuses to hide behind the façade of realism. She foregrounds the fact that Nelly is a shadow of her former self, a distorted rendition rather than a faithful reproduction. The narrator repeatedly intrudes into descriptions of Nelly, reminding the reader that she pulls the book’s strings. She refers to her childhood self as either Nelly or “das

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>37</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Das Unheimliche,” in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 12, ed. by Anna Freud, (1919; London: Imago Publishing, 1952), 226.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

Kind,” alternating between the female pronoun *sie* and the neuter *es*. From the outset, then, Nelly is strange to, and estranged from, the narrator. But the narrator’s sense of Nelly as *unheimlich* is not merely an unfortunate byproduct of remembrance. On the contrary, the narrator actively cultivates a sense of artificiality around her descriptions of Nelly and the past. All too aware of how much she has forgotten over the years, and how fallible her memory is, the narrator must fill in the gaps with other sources, including family members’ recollections, archival materials, and photographs. Instead of synthesizing this source material into a seamless narrative, she marks the artificiality of her project by informing the reader of what comes from memory and what has been culled from other materials. She renders the past present, but also draws attention to the fact that her depiction of the past can only ever be an incomplete assemblage.

Even though the narrator’s various “selves” (the *du* and the *sie/es*) sometimes blur together in her mind, she insists on separating them when she speaks: “Ich, du, sie, in Gedanken ineinanderschwimmend, sollen im ausgesprochenen Satz einander entfremdet werden.”<sup>39</sup> As Michael Levine has argued, through this pronominal splitting, the narrator’s ego “literally dis-integrates [...] The strategic dis-integration of the autobiographical ‘I’ and the related remapping of the pronominal coordinates of the novel open a narrative space for the otherness of this ego to emerge.”<sup>40</sup> By refusing an integrated *ich* that encompasses both present and past selves, Wolf emphasizes the gulf between the child and adult selves, suggesting that these are entirely different people. *Kindheitsmuster* unravels and unwrites the integrative processes of childhood that contribute to the formation of an adult sense of self.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>40</sup> Michael G. Levine, “Writing Anxiety: Christa Wolf’s *Kindheitsmuster*,” *Diacritics* 27, no. 2 (1997): 109-10.

<sup>41</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Das Ich und das Es*, in vol 13. of *Gesammelte Werke*, 237-89.

The formal splitting of the narrator's ego furthermore mirrors a different, dissociative process within Nelly herself, resulting from the encroachment of fascism on into everyday life. The narrator recalls how Nelly mentally partitions herself into two "people," one who acts and one who analyses:

Da widerfährt Nelly—nicht zum erstenmal aber selten vorher so deutlich—, daß sie sich in zwei Personen spaltet; die eine der beiden spielt harmlos mit allen zusammen 'Der Jude hat ein Schwein geschlachtet, was willst du davon haben!', die andere aber beobachtet sie alle und sich selbst von der Zimmerecke her und durchschaut alles. Die andere sieht: Hier will man etwas von ihr. Man ist berechnend.<sup>42</sup>

The self who observes and analyses (whom the narrator refers to as the "other" person) is not a "harmless" participant in the children's game, but an observer; she realizes that the others want "something" from her, that her participation has a social function that she can't quite articulate. As we shall see, there is an extent to which Wolf depicts this as a phenomenon experienced by sensitive children in general (an experience which *Kindheitsmuster* also paints in gendered terms). However, the realization comes during a moment of explicit anti-Semitism (even if the children do not necessarily comprehend its implications or have malicious intentions). This scene encapsulates what Wolf described as the problem of her generation: that many crucial milestones in their psychological and intellectual development are intimately, unconsciously linked with the crimes of the Nazi state. They were "normal" children adapting to the only environment they knew. And yet the narrator recognizes that this, too, was not entirely true—she is haunted by "die andere," the self who understood, however intuitively, that it was more than a children's game, with larger social implications.

The tension between observation and participation also mirrors the narrator's dilemma as a writer. Just as Nelly splits into two selves, so too is the narrative split between competing

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<sup>42</sup> Wolf, *KM*, 196.

impulses: to narrate and re-create on the one hand (as in a novel), and to analyze and resist fabrication on the other. The narrator wants the “Struktur des Erlebens” to map perfectly on to the “Struktur des Erzählens” in order to produce a “phantastische Genauigkeit.”<sup>43</sup> Such symmetry proves impossible: “Von einander überlagernden Schichten zu sprechen—‘Erzählebenen’—heißt auf ungenaue Benennungen ausweichen und den wirklichen Vorgang verfälschen.”<sup>44</sup> The fear of falsification or fabrication [*verfälschen*] is likewise the reason the narrator rejects her initial attempt at a beginning as too *romanhaft*; significantly, the scene she rejects dramatizes Nelly’s first cognizant use of the pronoun *ich*.

It is not only the fear of fabrication or fictionalization that prevents her from using this scene; the narrator later reveals that the pronoun *ich* and the capacity for uncomplicated self-referentiality are bound up with the same associations with the NS past as Nelly’s discovery of her two selves. The *ich* is linked to the imperative to forget, avoid, obfuscate: “Weil es nämlich unerträglich ist, bei dem Wort ‘Auschwitz’ das kleine Wort ‘ich’ mitdenken zu müssen: ‘Ich’ im Konjunktiv Imperfekt: Ich hätte. Ich könnte. Ich würde. Getan haben. Gehorcht haben.”<sup>45</sup> To her intense shame, the narrator finds within the past no indication that she would have done any differently than the adults and children around her, had she been compelled to do worse than stand idly by. The *ich*—in the dual sense of the pronoun on the one hand and the ego on the other—are so entangled with the Nazi era (in which the narrator’s “Kern der Persönlichkeit” was formed) that the only way the narrator can proceed with her retrospective is by breaking up the ego and avoiding the *ich* entirely. This exploration of shame and guilt is not merely a

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 396. Cf. Wolf, *LS*, in which she praises Georg Büchner for his “phantastische Genauigkeit” and “schöpferische Phantasie,” 266.

<sup>44</sup> Wolf, *KM*, 396.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 337.

performative self-flagellation, but a response to the GDR's narrative of the heroic antifascist resistor. The SED constructed the ideal East German subject as a hero whose core was supposedly constituted by unflinching resistance. The narrator, however, finds within herself no indication that she would have enacted any such resistance. Not only does the myth of the antifascist have no basis in lived reality, but it adds to the narrator's later shame—she measures herself against the impossible standard of a mythic, heroic subject, one apparently untouched by environment around him.

### *Realism and the "romanhaft" in Kindheitsmuster*

Much of *Kindheitsmuster* is about the narrator's failure to narrate like the 'second' Nelly, the one who watches her friends but does not participate in the anti-Semitic game. Gradually, however, she admits that "[d]ie Beschreibung der Vergangenheit—was immer das sein mag, dieser noch anwachsende Haufen von Erinnerungen—in objektivem Stil wird nicht gelingen."<sup>46</sup> There are many reasons an "objective" style fails her, not the least of which is the recognition of her participation in the scenes she describes, as well as her suspicion of her own motives in writing this book. Wolf's remarks about style are furthermore part of a sustained critique of realism (bourgeois and socialist), which Wolf had been making since at least the mid-sixties, especially with the novel *Nachdenken über Christa T.* (1968) and the essay *Lesen und Schreiben* (1968).<sup>47</sup>

At the same time, it is possible to overstate Wolf's rejection of realism, and the conventions of autobiography and the novel. While much has been written about the splitting of

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 240.

<sup>47</sup> On Wolf, her relationship to socialist realism, and misconceptions about socialist realism and GDR literature, see Hell, 15-19.

narrative pronouns, critics have tended to gloss over the extent to which Wolf nonetheless makes use of the *romanhaft* in constructing the book. Levine, for example, praises Wolf's refusal to "reinforce the impression that there is more than just a formal identity between the narrating 'I' and the 'I' whose story it tells. *Kindheitsmuster* resists such facile identifications;" Sandra Frieden writes that "Wolf's use of 'you' opens the possibility for internal conversation, for response to the self as 'other.'"<sup>48</sup> But while it is important to consider how Wolf's *ich-du-sie* split functions, it is also important not to oversell the radicality of this gesture, or of *Kindheitsmuster* as a whole. First, that something is a narrative convention (e.g., the I/I identification described by Levine) does not automatically make it facile. Second, though Wolf's gesture indeed calls attention to conscious othering of the self in autobiographical writing, it would be a mistake to assume that all or even most autobiography relies on one-to-one identification of narrator and subject/object; the autobiographical "I" is just as constructed as the narrator of any novel. Finally, when it comes to criticism on Christa Wolf, more is usually at stake than an assessment of a given work or body of work. Much like the figure of the child, Wolf is made to stand in for larger ideas: a refusal of Socialist Realism; resistance to the East German regime (somewhat ironically, given her refutation of heroic resistance here); and later, for the culpability of artists who lived under the GDR's dictatorship.<sup>49</sup>

With regard to *Kindheitsmuster*, analyses that look for resistance or radicalism in her work overlook the fact that Wolf employs the *romanhaft* even as she critiques it. Including her "false starts" at the book's actual beginning is one such act of apophasis. The narrator sketches her earlier beginning: three-year-old Nelly, sitting on the steps of her family's shop; her doll,

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<sup>48</sup> Levine, 109; Sandra Frieden, "A Guarded Iconoclasm: The Self as Deconstructing Counterpoint to Documentation," in Fries, 273.

<sup>49</sup> On the "double bind" faced by East German writers and a critique of these modes of criticism, see Hell, 8-17.

Lieselotte; the sights and sounds of the town at dusk.<sup>50</sup> After a paragraph, the narrator pulls back, describes her frustrations, her writing process, then tries again, and so on. Far from breaking with realism altogether, Wolf uses it as a point of entry for the reader, who is then abruptly confronted with the narrator's critique, then lulled back into a novelistic scene, only to be interrupted by critique yet again. It is also significant that the first few sketches of the past begin with an apparently innocent child who has just discovered the identification between herself and the word *ich*. Wolf gives us this scene even though she states that she considered beginning at other points, such as the flight from her hometown, when Nelly was nearly sixteen.<sup>51</sup> These other alternate beginnings are alluded to but not described at any length; only the scene of three-year-old Nelly is incorporated into *Kindheitsmuster*.

As many scholars have pointed out, the child—and particularly the young child rather than the adolescent—is a figure who invites identification and universalization.<sup>52</sup> Choosing to include the extended description of Nelly at age three rather than as a teenager suggests that the scene should evoke empathy in the reader, if only briefly. The reader is encouraged to latch onto the child's innocence; when the narrator describes “das Kind in aller Unschuld,” the *Unschuld* implicitly carries the dual meaning of the innocence attributed to children, and innocence of the crimes of the Nazi state.<sup>53</sup> Because, culturally, we associate the young child with innocence, the image of the three-year-old establishes the intertwining of these two types of *Unschuld* more effectively than an adult or teenaged character might.

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<sup>50</sup> See Wolf, *KM*, 16-19.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>52</sup> See e.g. Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 162-74; and Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 10-3.

<sup>53</sup> Wolf, *KM*, 16.

This is not to devalue Wolf's critique or the work as a whole, but to be clear-eyed about what she is doing and how she accomplishes it. As we shall see, Wolf also criticizes many assumptions about children, but is unable to entirely escape some of the tropes surrounding them. A similar interplay of styles—the *romanhaft* interrupted by metacommentary, memories of the past interrupted by present action—characterizes not only Nelly, but Wolf's other child figures as well. The text features a host of children, including Lenka, the narrator's daughter; Lutz, the narrator's younger brother; Elvira, a child of communist parents; Heini, a developmentally disabled child Nelly understands as somehow "not normal;" and Horst Binder, a fanatical Nazi. Of course, the book's primary, unrelenting focus is on Nelly. The narrator struggles with Nelly's otherness and the fallibility of her own memory in recalling her childhood. Wolf's struggle to break free of the conventions surrounding the figure of the child is inextricably bound up in her struggle with finding a literary form that can adequately excavate the effects of Nazism on her generation.

### **The Problem of Writing the Child**

Because the author looms so large in criticism, discussions of Wolf have tended to eclipse discussions of her main character, and how children function in this particular text. The critical literature on *Kindheitsmuster* has largely overlooked the extent to which Wolf grapples with the psychic and social pressures placed on children; the ways in which adults dehumanize children; the "normal" behaviors socialized into children which, in turn, made adults able to rapidly adapt to living in a fascist society; and the burdens placed specifically on girls.

If the splitting of the narrative pronouns can be likened to an intra-psychic splitting of the ego in *Kindheitsmuster*'s exploration of the "Kern der Persönlichkeit," the narrator's treatment of



Nelly might analogously be understood as an inquiry into the external, social pressures that shape the development of moral consciousness. These pressures begin early, before the Nelly or the narrator are able to remember: “Irgendwann hat es [Nelly] erfahren, daß Gehorchen und Geliebtwerden ein und dasselbe ist.”<sup>54</sup> The need to please and protect her parents in order to earn their love even affects her at the level of language:

Wörter wie ‘traurig’ oder ‘einsam’ lernt das Kind einer glücklichen Familie nicht, das dafür früh die schwere Aufgabe übernimmt, seine Eltern zu schonen. Sie zu verschonen mit Unglück und Scham. Die Alltagswörter herrschen: iß und trink und nimm und bitte danke. Sehen hören riechen schmecken tasten [...] Alles andere ist Einbildung.”<sup>55</sup>

The child learns that any feelings that might upset her parents are not to be spoken. Acceptable words are imperatives (directed at the child from the parents, and not the other way around), polite modifiers, or concrete descriptors of the external world (as opposed to the inner, emotional world). These early lessons suggest not only the immediate difficulties Nelly will face during her childhood, but also implicitly help the reader understand the narrator’s frustration with finding a style and mode of writing equal to the task of telling her story. The language she needs is not natural to her, in the sense that her ‘mother tongue,’ as it were, forbids expression of feelings that may cause discomfort to others. This, then, is one origin of the difficulties she has discussing her childhood under Nazism: her earliest understandings of language are bound up in the need to please her parents by avoiding anything unpleasant. Because those lessons were so fundamental to the process of the narrator’s development, searching for a language that purposefully discomfites requires a profound unsettling of the emotional and psychological processes that have come to constitute her innermost self, indelibly shaping the way she relates to others.

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<sup>54</sup> Wolf, *KM*, 30.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

Nelly's socialization for obedience and pleasantness in turn helps the reader understand the rapid acceptance and normalization of fascism. Children, the text argues, are raised for obedience. There is no radical break between the lessons of childhood and the actions of adults later on: adults generally act like the citizens they have been raised to be. Asked if she had ever met anyone who criticized the Nazis or made political jokes when she was a child, Wolf answered emphatically: "Nicht einen, nicht einen! Das ist es ja. Nicht einen!"<sup>56</sup> Having lived only among those who complied, who went on living normal lives under fascism, was one of her major impetuses for writing the book. Wolf's repeated confrontations with the lessons of those formative years signals to the reader how crucial it is to interrogate the need to conform; by showing how emotionally deep-seated obedience is, *Kindheitsmuster* asks its readers not only to understand the past, but implicitly enjoins them not to repeat the actions that enabled and sustained an authoritarian government.

To underscore this point, Wolf often draws comparisons between children and adult Germans in *Kindheitsmuster*. The narrator describes three-year-old Nelly's emergence into cognizance and memory as emerging from the "mit leuchtenden Figuren besetzten Dickicht der Märchen."<sup>57</sup> Years later, after Nelly and her mother, Charlotte, have fled west in order to escape the approaching Red Army, they encounter a former concentration camp inmate. Asked why he had been interned, the man says he had been a communist, to which Charlotte responds that people could not be thrown in concentration camps just for their political leanings. The man says, "ohne Vorwurf, ohne besondere Betonung: Wo habt ihr bloß alle gelebt."<sup>58</sup> Though his

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<sup>56</sup> Wolf, "Erfahrungsmuster," 51.

<sup>57</sup> Wolf, *KM*, 30.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 482.

tone seems to convey no reproach [*Vorwurf*], the man's words expose Charlotte's willful blindness to the reality of the preceding twelve years.

His response illustrates one of the book's projects: mapping the relationship between childhood socialization and acquiescence to Nazism on the one hand, and showing the cognitive dissonance required to disavow one's knowledge of the state's crimes on the other. Charlotte's response to the ex-prisoner is especially jarring because earlier in the book, the narrator discovers that the 1933 founding of the Dachau concentration camp was announced in the *General-Anzeiger*, along with its capacity to hold "[f]ünftausend arbeitsscheue, gemeingefährliche und politisch unzuverlässige Elemente."<sup>59</sup> The state made no secret of its imprisonment of citizens for their political beliefs; on the contrary, making knowledge of that imprisonment public served as a warning to all who might oppose the Nazi regime. For the narrator, the Germans who were what Michael Rothberg has called "implicated subjects"—that is, those who were not direct participants in violence but nonetheless enabled and benefitted from it<sup>60</sup>—acted much like a child emerging from the haze of infancy, forgetting that the establishment of concentration camps for "politically unreliable elements" was not only not a secret, but had been openly reported in the newspaper. And yet the narrator does not actively disbelieve the Germans' incredulity: "Verwirrender Verdacht: Sie hatten es tatsächlich total vergessen. Totaler Krieg. Totaler Amnesie."<sup>61</sup> Rather, she suspects and understands the strength of the mind's desire to purge discomforting and shameful information.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>60</sup> See Michael Rothberg, "Trauma Theory, Implicated Subjects, and the Question of Israel/Palestine," *Profession*, 2014. Online.

<sup>61</sup> Wolf, *KM*, 64.

<sup>62</sup> This would also be Wolf's response when, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, it was discovered that she had served for two years as an *informelle Mitarbeiter* (IM) for the Stasi—she had forgotten. See Hermann Vinke, "Vorwort," in *Akteneinsicht Christa Wolf. Zerrspiegel und Dialog*, ed. by Hermann Vinke (Hamburg: Luchterhand, 1993), 10-1.

Nelly and her mother serve as stand-ins for their respective generations in that scene, as well as ciphers for understanding the ways in which a society can accommodate itself to fascism. Similarly, the narrator's daughter, Lenka, comes to stand in for the generation of young people for whom Wolf is writing. Lenka, fourteen at the time of the narrator's trip to Poland, retains some habits of childhood, but also tries to assert her independence and challenge her mother and uncle while they remember their own upbringing. Although the narrator wants to pass her memories and experiences on to Lenka, both mother and daughter find the attempts at transmission frustrating. Lenka often does not, or will not, understand why "Nelly" acted or thought the way she did. When the narrator tries to explain the complicated mechanisms of dissociation and forgetting, Lenka refuses to understand (or so it seems to her mother): "Sie will nicht — noch nicht — erklärt haben, wie man zugleich anwesend und nicht dabeigewesen sein kann, das schauerliche Geheimnis der Menschen dieses Jahrhunderts."<sup>63</sup> Lenka functions as a reminder of the duty the narrator feels to future generations, as well as of her inability to satisfactorily articulate her experiences in a way they can understand. Both Nelly and Lenka show the reader the problems faced by each generation; however, they return the narrator to the dilemma of how to show the messy layers of the "Kern der Persönlichkeit" without constructing figures. While both Nelly and Lenka function metonymically, the narrator is very much concerned with making them more than functional, particularly when it comes to Nelly.

For Wolf, the problem of writing Nelly reflects the larger, more essential problem of writing literature. Discussing *Kindheitsmuster* a year before its publication, Wolf said she believed "daß Literatur versuchen sollte, diese Schichten zu zeigen, die in uns liegen – nicht so

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<sup>63</sup> Wolf, *KM*, 65.

säuberlich geordnet, nicht katalogisiert und schön ‘bewältigt’, wie wir es gern möchten.”<sup>64</sup> The book attempts to capture the person the narrator once was, to show the messy “layers” [Schichten] that together come to be called a single consciousness. The pronominal splitting is one formal method of capturing these layers; intertwining three distinct timelines (childhood; a trip to Poland in 1971; and a period of writing, roughly 1972-5) is another. Yet for all her efforts, the narrator struggles with how to represent Nelly as a complete person rather than a figure; Nelly remains a “Vorstellung,” “unerreichbar,” “ein Objekt.”<sup>65</sup> The narrator sees her use of Nelly as a reflection of her own shortcomings:

Nelly ist nichts anderes als ein Produkt deiner Scheinheiligkeit. Begründung: Wer sich zuerst alle Mühe gibt, aus einer Person ein Objekt zu machen und es sich gegenüberzustellen, kann nur scheinheilig sein, wenn er sich später beklagt, daß er sich diesem Objekt nicht mehr aussetzen kann; daß es ihm immer unverständlicher wird.<sup>66</sup>

Not only does she fault herself for her depiction of Nelly, characterizing it as objectification, but she also appears to find hypocrisy in her own critique, suggesting that she has made a straw man of Nelly. The supposed hypocrisy here relates not only to the act of writing or fabricating, but to the issue of writing the child.

While much has been written about the narrative strategies at work in *Kindheitsmuster*, comparatively little has been said of the focus Wolf gives to the actual experience of childhood.<sup>67</sup> (It is possible that this oversight is related to the emphasis on Wolf’s narrative innovations, as her explorations of childhood could arguably be understood as belonging to

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<sup>64</sup> Wolf, “Erfahrungsmuster,” 36.

<sup>65</sup> Wolf, *KM*, 10; 18; 309.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 309.

<sup>67</sup> On Nelly’s relationship to sexuality, see Hell, 200-20; on Nelly’s emotional development and intersubjective knowledge, see Love, 111-5; on Nelly’s relationship to her mother and gendered morality, see Katherine Stone, “Marxism, Gender and Mediated Memories of National Socialism: The Paradoxical Case of Christa Wolf’s *Kindheitsmuster* (1976),” in *German Life and Letters* 67, no. 2 (2014): 209-18.

traditions of realism.) Yet the experiences of childhood and their impact on the development of the self, as well as childhood's implications for adult society, are integral narrative and thematic threads throughout the book. The narrator dwells extensively on the psychic burdens adults place on children, even without the greater social pressures imposed by Nazism. She recalls, for instance, the condescending manner with which Bruno Jordan addressed his daughter: "Mit Kindern sprach er kindertümelnd und nicht über ernsthafte Gegenstände—so wie Erwachsene, die sich nicht vorstellen, daß Kinder jemals Erwachsene werden, mit Kindern eben reden. Als sei nur der Erwachsene ein vollwertiger Mensch."<sup>68</sup> Adults' manner of addressing children reveals that they do not believe children to be fully human (yet), a point driven home by the narrator's use of the adjective *vollwertig*; although the comparison is left unspoken, the choice calls to mind what the Nazis called those they did not deem valuable—*minderwertig*. Certainly, Wolf is not drawing a direct analogy between adults' treatment of children and the Nazis' treatment of so-called "undesirables." Rather, she points out that the failure to imagine the other as a complete human being is a mundane phenomenon, exercised unthinkingly, even with benign intentions. Wolf furthermore extends her critique beyond the NS period into contemporary politics, citing in particular the actions of the United States in the Vietnam War. In fact, Wolf specifically highlights the treatment of children in that conflict, noting the U.S.'s airlifting of children out of Vietnam after the fall of Saigon, and U.S.'s lack of understanding at how the rest of the world viewed that action.<sup>69</sup> Given how much effort is expended critiquing and correcting adults' attitudes towards children, it is worth examining in greater detail how Wolf constructs her

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<sup>68</sup> Wolf, *KM*, 273.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 559. On Operation Babylift and the evacuation of children out of Vietnam, see e.g. Paisley Rekdal, *The Broken Country: On Trauma, a Crime, and the Continuing Legacy of Vietnam* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2017), chapter nine.

child characters, and how that construction in turn builds her criticisms of both literature and the society in which she lives.

### **Patterns of the Child: Writing the Inner Lives of Girls**

For Wolf, the child is an extraordinarily sensitive, intuitive creature. Elsewhere, she identifies a “Kernproblem” of the book as the question of “wie Angst entsteht.”<sup>70</sup> Although this has some generation-specific implications, Wolf understands the problem of fear as a common experience of childhood. Here she means more than the fears that are artificially created (prejudices against certain groups of people, for instance); some fear is inexplicable, and often bound up with experiences of shame.<sup>71</sup> These emotions are driving factors in Nelly’s development. She intuits and senses rules and taboos, often not needing to be told what they are, an ability which seems to be a general quality of female children in the book. This ability is nothing magical; on the contrary, it highlights that children have a finely-tuned sensitivity to adult behavior and moods. It is a survival mechanism.

Nelly’s ability to sense and adapt to unspoken rules is also potentially lifesaving. Looking back on the early years of the NS regime, the narrator reflects on a particular episode with an older girl, Elvira, who tells Nelly that her parents were communists and had cried at the news of the Reichstag fire. Nelly recognizes without being told that this is a “wichtiges Geheimnis,” and keeps it a secret; as an adult, the narrator wonders why.<sup>72</sup> It wasn’t because Elvira was a friend (in fact, she had often teased Nelly), and it wasn’t because Nelly understood the consequences of

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<sup>70</sup> Wolf, “Erfahrungsmuster,” 45.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 45-6.

<sup>72</sup> Wolf, *KM*, 90.

being a communist in 1933. Rather, it had to do with what she thought of as “Glitzerworte[,]” because “[d]en Erwachsenen, die sie [die Worte] aussprachen, begannen die Augen zu glitzern.”<sup>73</sup> “Communist” is one such *Glitzerwort*; she notices that adults have begun to avoid sentences that mention the words “Kommunist” or “kommunistisch.”<sup>74</sup>

“Unnormal” and “[a]rtfremd” are likewise *Glitzerworte*. Nelly understands, again without being told, that Heini, a neighborhood boy, “der immer lacht, ohne je lustig zu sein,” is not normal. She also understands what her father means when he reads aloud from an article on the implementation of the Nazis’ eugenic sterilization law [*Gesetz zur Verhütung des erbkranken Nachwuchses*], even though the meaning has never been explained to her.<sup>75</sup> For Wolf, children’s linguistic development (and therefore their cognitive and social development) is intimately bound up with the silences, unspoken rules, and unarticulated taboos with which adults associate them. Without being given a word for the concept of taboo, Nelly readily invents her own—the associative, imagistic term *Glitzerwort*.

This depiction of the intuitive child is also a highly gendered construction. This becomes evident when *Kindheitsmuster* is compared with depictions of children found in Wolf’s earlier novel, *Nachdenken über Christa T.* There are many resonances between the two books. Both open with meditations on the impossibilities of language and memory and are interested in sifting through the remnants of the past; both describe a child’s discovery of the word *ich*.<sup>76</sup> The books exist in the same autobiographical/fictional universe, with Christa T. even making a very

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 91, 94.

<sup>76</sup> See Christa Wolf, *Nachdenken über Christa T.*, vol. 2 of *Werke* (1968; Munich: Luchterhand, 1999), 11-3, 32. Abbreviated hereafter as *Christa T.*



brief appearance in *Kindheitsmuster*.<sup>77</sup> Both books are primarily concerned with the emotional development of their respective female protagonists, deploying male children as foils for the girls.

Comparing the nuanced, sympathetic portrayals of girls in these texts to the depictions of their male counterparts complicates some of the theoretical work on the child. As Valerie Walkerdine has rightly pointed out,

although the child is taken to be gender-neutral, actually he is always figured as a boy who is playful, creative, naughty, rule-breaking, rational. The figure of the girl, by contrast, suggests an unnatural pathology: she works to the child's play, she follows rules to his breaking of them, she is good, well behaved and irrational.<sup>78</sup>

Put differently, the default assumption is that the word 'child' signifies a boy unless otherwise indicated. Similarly, the behaviors associated with boys (rule-breaking, mischief) are figured as normative ("rational," in Walkerdine's terms). Wolf turns this assumption on its head by using a girl's narrative for her "model" [*Muster*] childhood. Furthermore, *Kindheitsmuster* and *Christa T.* both challenge the link between masculinity and rationality. Wolf associates boy children with senseless, unpredictable violence, and girls' obedience with rationality and logic.

As a young woman, Christa T. becomes a teacher in order to find "Schutz bei Kindern."<sup>79</sup> It quickly becomes apparent, however, that she will find nothing like the comfort or sense of protection she seeks. A group of her ten-year-old students smash birds' eggs and hurl a cat against a wall; in other instances, they drown a cat and throw stones at an old, blind dog.<sup>80</sup> Later, her career as a teacher comes to an end after one of her pupils bites off the head of a toad on a

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<sup>77</sup> Wolf, *KM*, 334.

<sup>78</sup> Valerie Walkerdine, "Popular Culture and the Eroticization of Little Girls," in *The Children's Culture Reader*, 256.

<sup>79</sup> Wolf, *Christa T.*, 40.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 41-2. Cf. also Chapter Three on Herta Müller.

school trip.<sup>81</sup> Christa T. is not so much disgusted as saddened by the needless violence of this act. The school's director, however, reprimands her for her emotions, and blames her for the incident.<sup>82</sup> The director fails to realize what upsets Christa T.: namely the connection between the boys' actions—and the lack of consequences they face for them—and the men they will grow up to be.

Both scenes of boys' violence are immediately followed by scenes in which Christa T. meets or imagines meeting these adult pupils and their wives. She longs to confront them and ask if they remember what they'd done, or made any connection between their actions and the actions of their own children.<sup>83</sup> In *No Future*, Lee Edelman makes an analogous observation: children's (i.e., boys') "cuteness" masks the similarities between their behavior and adults'.<sup>84</sup> Edelman is specifically referring to unwelcome sexual advances, but a similar logic holds for the boys depicted in *Christa T.* Senseless though their violence may be, Christa T. is equally if not more disturbed by the fact that adults allow the behavior to go unchecked, thereby naturalizing it and allowing it to continue into future generations.

In *Christa T.*, part of the narrator's fascination with her late friend stems from how Christa T. differs from those around her, and in fact actively desires to be different. She recounts a formative moment in which as a child, the young Christa T. looks in the mirror and thinks to herself, "ICH bin anders."<sup>85</sup> By contrast, there is no analogous moment for Nelly: the relentless focus of *Kindheitsmuster* is the cultivation of obedience. Nelly, furthermore, has no desire to be

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 121-4.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 124-5.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 41-2, 125-7.

<sup>84</sup> Edelman, 129-37.

<sup>85</sup> Wolf, *Christa T.*, 32.

different. (When she first says “ich,” she revels in the word and its connection to herself, but she does not turn it into a grammatical sentence, or use it to associate a specific quality with the inner self she can now identify.<sup>86</sup>) For Nelly, any infraction, intentional or otherwise, is cause for shame rather than a mark of independence. Much of her inner life is bound up in figuring out and following the rules, because with obedience comes the love of the adults around her.

In *Kindheitsmuster*, Wolf’s interest lies in the phenomenon of obedience precisely because it was the normative, defining experience of her childhood (recall her exclamation that she didn’t know a single person who expressed dissent). Even though the urge to conform felt by Nelly and the rest of her generation seems irrational and inexplicable in retrospect (especially to the young people of Lenka’s generation), *Kindheitsmuster* goes to great lengths to understand and explain life under fascism as a series of “rational” (i.e., self-interested) choices. When the Nazi regime radically reverses civil liberties, Nelly’s parents initially believe they are not affected:

Die Beschränkungen gewisser persönlicher Freiheiten (nur als Beispiel), ihnen am 1. März 1933 kundgetan, würden sie kaum am eigenen Leibe fühlen, denn sie hatten ja auch bislang keine Publikationen geplant (Pressefreiheit) oder an Massenzusammenkünften teilgenommen (Versammlungsfreiheit): Sie hatten einfach nicht das Bedürfnis danach verspürt.<sup>87</sup>

These reasons of course seem short-sighted and self-interested with hindsight, but they are still reasons.<sup>88</sup> Retrospectively, however, being “well-behaved”—a virtue usually identified with girls and femininity—means being a conformist or complicit in the Nazi state.

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<sup>86</sup> Wolf, *KM*, 16.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>88</sup> Even though Wolf critiques some of the official GDR narratives about Nazi period, this is one place where her explanation is consistent with the state’s. She often takes time to explain the economic motives people had for adapting to Nazi policies, including Nelly’s father, who, for example, benefits from the boycotting of Jewish stores. See e.g. Wolf, *KM*, 66-8. On the GDR association between fascism on the one hand and capitalism and imperialism on the other, see Emmerich, *Kleine Literaturgeschichte*, 29-39.

The exhortation to obedience also manifests itself in Nelly's growing awareness of sexuality. Neither *Christa T.* nor *Kindheitsmuster* shows much interest in the sexual development of boys, but for girls, sex is a source of anxiety because they face contradictory social expectations, which in turn make perfect obedience impossible. Nelly finds herself caught between her mother's imperative not to "throw herself away" and the state's demand that healthy Aryan women bear children as a gift to the Führer.<sup>89</sup> Reading a report on the *Lebensborn* project produces such a feeling of discomfort and revulsion that it leads to one of her only moments of conscious disagreement with the Nazi state: when she finishes reading the article, she thinks to herself, "Das nicht."<sup>90</sup> She concludes that "Alles, was mit ihrem Geschlecht zu tun hatte, war über jedes erträgliche Maß hinaus kompliziert."<sup>91</sup>

Nelly has no sexual exploits, nor does she really have any romantic or sexual interest in boys or men. Her first experience of love is for one of her teachers, Juliane Strauch. Julia (as the narrator calls her) fascinates Nelly for a number of reasons, one of which being that she holds a doctorate, and therefore is a young woman who is not addressed as "Fräulein," but as "Frau Doktor."<sup>92</sup> Julia is a dedicated teacher who goes out of her way to show that she respects working-class children. She is also a committed National Socialist and serves as NS-*Frauenschaftsleiterin*. Nelly waits anxiously for any sign of Julia's approval, even lingering outside of the school in hopes of a greeting; at the same time, she fears Julia, sensing that she can

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<sup>89</sup> See Wolf, *KM*, 326-7.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 327.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 322. In some ways, the character of Julia echoes the trope of the "educated spinster," a figure dating from the nineteenth century which encodes queer female sexuality and fears about women's economic and political independence. See e.g. Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in the Twentieth Century*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 13-8.

be calculating and vengeful.<sup>93</sup> Nelly also intuitively feels that Julia hates being a woman, something that sets the two apart; for all the complications associated with her gender, Nelly cannot bring herself to feel the same way.

The pressure on girls to obey—and the consequences they face if they do not—is furthermore reflected in one of Wolf's choice of intertexts: the *Märchen*. Throughout *Kindheitsmuster*, Wolf evokes fairy tales and the lessons they have for girls and women, including “Das Marienkind,” “Dornröschen,” “Hänsel und Gretel.” As Maria Tatar writes, women and children are often treated similarly in the world of fairy tales: “Like children, women—by nature volatile and unruly—were positioned as targets of disciplinary intervention that would mold them for subservient roles, making more visible forms of coercion superfluous.”<sup>94</sup> Given Wolf's subject matter—the ways in which people complied with fascism (to whatever degree of willingness or enthusiasm)—it makes sense that she would draw on stories about coercion and punishment.

Certainly, children interpret and understand texts in a variety of different ways; fairy tales can always be read against the grain.<sup>95</sup> But Wolf is very specific about how Nelly chooses to understand these texts, and the social function they serve in her life. Her use of *Märchen* as intertexts reflects Wolf's interest in both feminism on the one hand and German Romanticism on the other: throughout her oeuvre, Wolf drew on German Romantic traditions while often

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<sup>93</sup> See Wolf, *KM*, 319-335. The discussion of Julia is in fact the same place where Christa T. appears in *Kindheitsmuster*: another reminder of Christa T.'s difference is that she has no interest in earning Julia's approval. See *ibid.*, 334.

<sup>94</sup> Maria Tatar, *Off with Their Heads!: Fairy Tales and the Culture of Childhood* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992) 96.

<sup>95</sup> See e.g. Alison Lurie, *Don't Tell the Grown-Ups: The Subversive Power of Children's Literature* (New York: Little, Brown, 1990); Nicholas Tucker, “How Children Respond to Fiction,” in *Writers, Critics, and Children*, ed. Geoff Fox (New York: Agathon, 1976), 177–78.

reinterpreting and rewriting them from a feminist perspective.<sup>96</sup> In *Kindheitsmuster*, she demonstrates the effects of Romanticism's cultural products (in this case *Märchen*) on children's culture.

As we have already seen, fairy tales in *Kindheitsmuster* provide an analogy for a child's mind before entry into memory. The boundaries between fables and reality are more malleable before the child is able to cognitively and temporally order her understanding of the world. But even after she understands what is real and what is not, fairy tales continue to provide Nelly with significant insights. Although her parents try to shield her from the world, going so far as to cross out the part of "Hänsel und Gretel" where the parents abandon their children in the woods, Nelly reads in the text a warning of what adults are capable of; this understanding reinforces the imperative to obedience that she feels.<sup>97</sup>

In *Kindheitsmuster*, such exhortations to obedience are often couched in gendered terms. Whereas the boys in *Christa T.* do as they please (even when specifically asked not to), comparable actions land Nelly in trouble. This, too, is a pattern familiar from fairy tales, where curiosity and playfulness are virtues in men and vices in women.<sup>98</sup> While acting out "Das Marienkind" with her four-year-old brother, seven-year-old Nelly experiences a moment of rebellion. Playing the part of the *Marienkind*, Nelly digresses from the story: instead of confessing to the Virgin Mary at the end, she continues to deny that she opened the thirteenth door. Her brother (playing the Virgin Mary), throws a tantrum at this deviation, and Nelly grabs him, accidentally dislocating his arm. While he is in the hospital, he also catches the measles.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> See Robert Sayre and Michael Löwy, "Romanticism as Feminist Vision: The Quest of Christa Wolf," in *New German Critique*, no. 64 (1995): 105–9.

<sup>97</sup> Wolf, *KM*, 28–9.

<sup>98</sup> See Tatar, 96 – 111.

<sup>99</sup> See Wolf, 34–5, 175.

Instead of giving up the lie and being saved, as in the fairy tale, Nelly continues to deny the *Marienkind*'s transgression while playing, which causes the game to disintegrate, leading to her brother's injury. She does indeed experience remorse at this, especially when her mother tells her that if her brother experiences lasting physical consequences from the measles, she, Nelly, will be responsible [*Schuld*].<sup>100</sup> Even in attempting to break the narrative structure of "Das Marienkind," Nelly ends up repeating a familiar pattern of the *Märchen*: transgression of norms, followed by blame and punishment.

Fairy tales also provide Nelly with emotional models that prepare her for difficult experiences. When Nelly's father returns from a POW camp, he is almost unrecognizable, but the narrator writes that "[m]erkwürdigerweise hatte Nelly es geahnt. Märchen bereiten uns von klein auf darauf vor: Der Held, der König, der Prinz, der Geliebte wird in die Fremde verwunschen: als ein Fremder kehrt er zurück."<sup>101</sup> In addition to preparing her for the transformation of a loved one into something different, something *verwunschen*, the fairy also implicitly prepares Nelly for the kinds of war narratives that the narrator will later critique in the writing of *Kindheitsmuster*.

In fairy tales such as "Dornröschen"—the *Märchen* the novel associates with the end of the war and Germans' 'awakening' to the crimes of the Nazi state<sup>102</sup>—the woman is passive and waits for the man to awaken and rescue her. *Kindheitsmuster* uses such parallels to highlight the erasure of women's stories in the postwar period. Their flight from Poland and the Red Army, for instance, remained little discussed at the time of the book's publication; the narrator speculates that this is because "die jungen Männer, die über ihre Erlebnisse später Bücher

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 580.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 459.

schrieben, Soldaten waren.”<sup>103</sup> Even in the immediate aftermath of the war, Nelly observes people averting their eyes from starving women in the street.<sup>104</sup> Wolf’s turn away from the *romanhaft* and towards a blending of other literary genres—such as the fairy tale—is part of a frustration with the genre of war writing that only acknowledges men’s suffering, as if women and children had, like *Dornröschen*, not experienced any hardships of their own, only slumbered peacefully and waited passively for the men return them to their lives.

Fairy tales—as mediated and transmitted into children’s culture by philologists such as the Brothers Grimm—offer limited possibilities for women and children as protagonists.<sup>105</sup> Using *Märchen* as intertexts allows Wolf to explore the effects that literature has on the development of the self and children’s understanding of the world—both what stories can enable, and what restrictions certain genres and forms place on imagination.

### **Fear of the Child**

The use of fairy tales in *Kindheitsmuster* also serves to echo and reinforce a persistent theme of the book: fear of the child. Although they have been closely associated with the idea of the innocent child in contemporary culture, fairy tales themselves by no means espouse that perspective. As Tatar writes, “Despite the persistence of idealized constructions of childhood as an age of innocence, it has not been easy to see children as either victims or heroes, particularly since Freud. Driven by narcissistic desires and unbridled rage, they are often perceived as the

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 467.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 468.

<sup>105</sup> Cf. Tatar, xxi-xxiv, 96-111; and Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan, or The Impossibility of Children’s Fiction* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1984), introduction and chapter one.



real agents of evil and as the sources of familial conflict.”<sup>106</sup> *Kindheitsmuster* takes up this suspicion of children, even as it goes to great lengths to paint Nelly as sensitive, intuitive, and vulnerable.

The book’s focus on the indoctrination of children suggests that children pose a latent threat to the adults who care for them. The children in *Kindheitsmuster* are dangerous because of their susceptibility to indoctrination and their lack of awareness of their potential power. To echo the narrator’s words from the beginning of the book, children in *Kindheitsmuster* seem *unheimlich*, in the sense that Freud describes in his essay. They look like people, but their words and actions are not quite ‘right’ (i.e., adult). They lack not only an adult capacity for reason, but an appreciation of the consequences of their actions. We have already seen some examples of this in Nelly herself; she understands, however intuitively, that she has the power to endanger Elvira and her family, and she discovers that she can, even unintentionally, cause physical harm to others when she injures her brother.

More broadly, the overall text reflects an anxiety that is related to children’s ignorance of the world. This ignorance is related to, but not coextensive with, the innocence so often discussed in literary, historical, and cultural criticism on the figure of the child. Innocence is often shorthand for innocence of desire and sexuality (one’s own or others’); it can also signal a lack of awareness of violence, suffering, and poverty, which means that the archetypal “innocent” child is generally assumed to be white and middle- or upper-class (and, in the criticism discussed here, culturally Anglo-American).<sup>107</sup> As we have seen, scholars have furthermore pointed out that the “innocence” so often ascribed to children has more to do with

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<sup>106</sup> Tatar, xxiv.

<sup>107</sup> See Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 30-3.

placing limitations on both the child and on certain classes of adults than it does with descriptive accuracy.<sup>108</sup>

Already, then, it is evident that this reading of the innocent child does not quite map on to the children of *Kindheitsmuster*. The children Wolf focuses on are working class; they are exposed to war and suffering at a relatively young age. They are also not ignorant of sexuality. The book repeatedly draws attention to the fact that a regular part of the Nazi school curriculum is “[e]ugenische Lebensführung;” Nelly learns that German womanhood means bearing healthy Aryan children.<sup>109</sup> As Dagmar Herzog has shown, sexuality was an important component of the Nazi state: its “aim was to reinvent [sexuality] as the privilege of the nondisabled, heterosexual ‘Aryans’” in the service of reproductive and social engineering.<sup>110</sup> Nelly’s awareness of the Nazis’ reproductive goals is nothing unusual because the state actively promoted liberal attitudes towards sexuality, including premarital sex, among those considered eugenically fit.<sup>111</sup> While Nelly receives conflicting messages from the state and from her family about what constitutes a proper expression of female sexuality, the children of *Kindheitsmuster* are not constructed as innocent of sexuality in the same way as the children figured in the texts examined by Kathryn Bond Stockton, Lee Edelman, James R. Kincaid, Eve Sedgwick, and others.

These critics, particularly Edelman and Kincaid, often focus on the way the child serves as a foil for the figure of the predatory adult. This adult represents some version of nonnormative

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<sup>108</sup> On the queerness/strangeness of innocence, and adults’ fear of children, see Stockton, 5-41; on the use of the child in disenfranchising queer adults, see Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 2-28; on the eroticization of children’s innocence, see James R. Kincaid, “Producing Erotic Children,” in *The Children’s Culture Reader*, ed. by Henry Jenkins (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 247-50.

<sup>109</sup> Wolf, *KM*, 96, 327.

<sup>110</sup> Dagmar Herzog, *Sex After Fascism: Memory and Morality in Twentieth-Century Germany*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 5.

<sup>111</sup> See *ibid.*, 15-29.

sexuality, and the child serves as an excuse to regulate, surveil, and/or punish the adult for their deviance.<sup>112</sup> The Nazi regime is no exception to this trend; that state certainly mobilized the trope of the innocent child for its own ends. The Nazis exploited the sexual threat Jews allegedly posed to German women and thereby to future generations of German children, as well as recycling much older narratives of blood libel, which claimed that Jews made ritualistic use of non-Jewish children's blood.<sup>113</sup> However, the state's symbolic use of the child is not Wolf's primary focus; the book is far more concerned with the danger fascism poses to actual children, and how its exploitation of children makes those children dangerous to others, which in turn severs traditional kinship ties in order to promote loyalty to the state above all.

Examples of the harm done to children and adolescents by the fascist state abound in *Kindheitsmuster*: youth die in the war; babies are stolen for the *Lebensborn* program; the disabled are sterilized and euthanized. (Though it is intimately concerned with the crimes of the fascist state, the book focuses on the experiences of "Aryan" German children rather than on the violence done to the millions of Jewish, Eastern European, Roma, and other "non-Aryan" children who were also victims of the Nazi regime.) But one of the text's greatest concerns is with a more mundane vulnerability—namely, children's susceptibility to indoctrination. Nelly belongs to a generation of children for whom the Nazi regime was, for a time, the only reference point for normality. Although Wolf was generally optimistic about the human capacity for change, she found it impossible to pretend that this upbringing had not had lasting effects on her and her generational cohort.<sup>114</sup> *Kindheitsmuster* focuses often on the intimate, quotidian ways in

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<sup>112</sup> See e.g. Edelman 11-28; Kincaid, "Producing Erotic Children," 246-8.

<sup>113</sup> Herzog, 5; on Nazis' accusations of ritual murder of children by Jews, see e.g. Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews: The Years of Persecution, 1933-1939* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 123-4.

<sup>114</sup> See Wolf, "Erfahrungsmuster," 46-54.

which her Nazi upbringing went on to permeate Nelly's life; for example, the narrator describes how it took Nelly two years of conscious effort to learn to say "Guten Tag" and "Auf Wiedersehen" instead of using the so-called "Deutsche[r] Gruß."<sup>115</sup>

However, what makes children an apparent object of fear in the book is the question of whether they will remain loyal to the traditional social configurations (including their own nuclear families), or whether they will place loyalty to the state above all else, as the Nazi regime desires. This gives us a different perspective on the fear of the child described in Kathryn Bond Stockton's *The Queer Child*. For Stockton, adults' fears about children stem primarily from economic concerns (fear of the child acquiring power or independence through money) or from the child's strangeness (related to weakness and absence of sexuality implied in the child's "innocence"). These fears are also temporal in nature: the child "is a creature of *gradual growth* and *managed delay*, bolstered by laws that ideally will protect it from its own participation in its pleasure and its pain."<sup>116</sup> Adults, responsible for managing the child's growth, fear that children will reach adulthood too quickly ('before they're ready') or else too slowly (indicating nonnormative development).

Fundamentally, the anxieties Stockton describes all relate to the question of power—the child's power and autonomy, and whether the 'correct' people have power over the child. Power is also at the core of the fears expressed in *Kindheitsmuster*, but considerably more is at stake for the child living under authoritarianism. The hyperpatriotic and/or indoctrinated child is itself arguably something of a trope in literature dealing with authoritarian regimes, such as in George Orwell's *1984* (1949) and Bertolt Brecht's *Furcht und Elend des Dritten Reiches* (1937-8/1946).

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<sup>115</sup> Wolf, *KM*, 68.

<sup>116</sup> Stockton, 41. Italics in original.

The former features a patriot whose children turn him in for cursing Big Brother in his sleep; the latter contains a scene in which parents are unsure whether their young son has denounced them to the Gestapo for making defeatist comments. Wolf takes this fear to the extreme with one of her minor characters, Horst Binder.

Horst Binder is an acquaintance of Nelly's who is obsessed with the Führer. His hair is cut like Hitler's and he will only leave the house for school and for *Jungvolkdienst*; he tries to know what the Führer is doing at any given time so that he can be doing the same thing. The narrator implies that Binder is in some way developmentally disabled, noting his "Rücken leicht gekrümmt, mit seinem langen, etwas schleppenden Schritt," and his obsessive ability to remember every individual scrap of information about Hitler.<sup>117</sup> One could arguably read Binder as a parody of the *Hitlerjugend* ideal—fanatically obsessed with the Führer to the point of being grotesque, or "unheimlich," as Nelly finds Binder<sup>118</sup>—but Wolf approaches *Kindheitsmuster* with too much concern for the inner lives of children to be interested in only parody. Binder's story ends in tragedy rather than farce. In the spring of 1945, when Nelly's family and their neighbors prepare to flee the approaching Red Army, Horst Binder murders his family and then kills himself.<sup>119</sup> The narrator can only imagine what that final scene might have looked like, but she attributes the murder-suicide to Binder's fanatical devotion to the Führer and to the Nazi state.

The Horst Binder story reflects an underlying fear in the text, namely that their children might opt to follow an authority other than their parents. Parents fear exactly what they demand

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<sup>117</sup> Wolf, *KM*, 298.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> Binder also makes a brief appearance in *Nachdenken über Christa T.* The narrator of that book relates more or less the same story, but with an added detail: Binder was praised by his *Bannführer* for reporting on his own father for listening to Allied radio. See Wolf, *Christa T.*, 38.

of their children—their obedience. They want their children to listen to authority, but they also fear that their children will be too literal, that they lack the nuance of understanding which authority is to be obeyed absolutely and which is to be ignored or only nominally acknowledged. This in turn puts children in an impossible, almost Kafkaesque position: they are expected, essentially, to already have an adult understanding of the world, without being told what that means.

In its explorations of what parents demand of children, the text suggests that these confusing exhortations have perfectly socialized children for life under an authoritarian state. Too much is left implied rather than explained, as the narrator writes when she describes the deaths of Horst Binder and his parents: “Deutsche Familien bringen einander im Schlafzimmer um. Werden sie gesprochen haben? Nirgendwo wird so abgrundtief geschwiegen wie in deutschen Familien.”<sup>120</sup> Children’s ignorance of nuance, as well as the potential consequences of their actions, add to our understanding of what Stockton means when she writes that “*evidently, we are scared of the child we would protect.*”<sup>121</sup> If their very “protection” endangers children, as Stockton argues, then in an authoritarian state that protection in turn endangers the adults closest to those children.

For the narrator, part of the fascination with Horst Binder stems from the fear of what she (Nelly) might have done, had circumstances been otherwise. Repeatedly she searches her memory, but finds no moral bulwark, no reassurance that she would have always grown up to be the person she is. Rather she finds instances of when she did nothing, such as when she eats soup in front of a starving Ukrainian *Ostarbeiterin*. The narrator, ashamed, remembers that it never

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<sup>120</sup> Wolf, *KM*, 303.

<sup>121</sup> Stockton, 37. Italics in original.

even occurred to Nelly that she might share her food with the woman; instead, on seeing the prisoners, she thought of what she had learned in school about the hierarchy between races: “Was sie [Nelly] den Fremden gegenüber empfand, war nicht Mitleid, sondern Scheu, ein starkes Gefühl von Anderssein, dem kein Geheimnis zugrunde lag, sondern Julia Strauchs Geschichtsunterricht: Anders heißt wertvoller.”<sup>122</sup> The fear of children expressed throughout the book is the narrator’s specific fear of the child she once was, and how closely connected that person remains to the adult she has become. For while it is true that the pronominal split between the adult *du* and the childhood *sie/es* serves partly as a kind of *Verfremdungseffekt*, reminding the reader that these are “narratively and grammatically constructed ‘persons,’” as Levine argues, the split also accomplishes more than that.<sup>123</sup> It provides a barrier between the narrator and the past self whose thoughts and actions now shame her. The narrator laments that Nelly grows harder and harder to understand the older she gets: “Je näher sie dir in der Zeit rückt, um so fremder wird sie dir.”<sup>124</sup> That is, the closer that Nelly and the narrator come to being the same person, the harder it is for the narrator—psychologically, emotionally—to examine Nelly’s life.

For Stockton, the idea of the child is “a ghostly, unreachable fancy” because that child is “precisely who we are not and, in fact, never were. It is the act of adults looking back.”<sup>125</sup> The narrator of *Kindheitsmuster*, however, is haunted by the person she once was. Part of the formal act of separating Nelly from her adult self, in making her a “vehicle” that seems to move according to its own rules rather than the narrator’s (as if this autonomy were not itself a literary feint) is about isolating the adult from the dangerous child. This, too, helps explain her

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<sup>122</sup> Wolf, *KM*, 363.

<sup>123</sup> Levine, 109.

<sup>124</sup> Wolf, *KM*, 309.

<sup>125</sup> Stockton, 5.

discomfort with turning Nelly into a “vehicle” or puppet: in that act of distancing, the narrator recognizes her own resistance to facing the past, and her desire *not* to acknowledge that Nelly is still a part of her. But in the act of telling Nelly’s story, there are often slippages that reveal how flimsy this construct is, such as when the narrator must ‘correct’ herself and reassert the barriers between herself and Nelly, between *du* and *sie*: “Dann aber saßest du plötzlich—nicht du: Nelly, das Kind.”<sup>126</sup> She repeatedly encounters moments of potential threat, moments at which, were it not for the contingencies of historical and social circumstance, Nelly—and therefore the narrator—might have become someone like Horst Binder or Juliane Strauch.

As Tatar points out in her analysis Bruno Bettelheim, projecting anxieties or even evil onto the child can serve as a deflection from what is really a fear of adults’ capacity for evil: “The need to deny the evil adult [...] has been a pervasive feature of our culture, leading us to position children not only as the sole agents of evil, but also as objects of unending religious, moral, and therapeutic instruction.”<sup>127</sup> Of course, Wolf does not position children as the “sole agents of evil,” nor does she deny what adults are capable of. Children like Horst Binder, however, are an object of fascination because they reveal the *unheimlich* in what adults demand of children. Binder’s fanatical obedience makes him into a kind of “vehicle,” one set into motion not by an author but by the state and the many actors who put its ideology into action. The consequences that result from using the child in this manner—not only for the Binder family but for Germany—help us understand why Wolf is so wary of turning the child into a metaphor or a vehicle. She views the objectification of Nelly as a process analogous to the way she has seen adults use children her whole life.

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<sup>126</sup> Wolf, *KM*, 191.

<sup>127</sup> Tatar, xxiv.



Yet while Binder becomes an object of abject horror and an extreme example of how Nazi ideology tainted Nelly's generation, the narrator significantly does not express the same outright horror and incomprehension at the adult figures who transmitted this ideology, from Juliane Strauch to Herr Warsinski, who tells Nelly that "ein deutsches Mädel muß hassen können," or the tenth-grade biology teacher who instructs students in the hierarchy of "niedere[] Rassen."<sup>128</sup> As in Tatar's reading of fairy tales, the trope of the monstrous child both expresses and distracts from the monstrosity of adults. After the war, Nelly's instinct is to defend Julia's actions. Fittingly, it is another teacher, Maria Kranhold, who talks her through the implications of National Socialist ideology:

Nun sei allerdings Glauben keine Entschuldigung, sagte die Kranhold dann. Man müsse sich schon ansehen, woran man glaube. Über die wichtigsten Dinge sei ja niemand belogen worden. [...] Und Leute vom Schlage ihrer alten Lehrerin Juliane Strauch sind sich mit ihrem Daran-Glauben selbst in die Falle gegangen. Wer soll sie dafür freisprechen, daß sie ihr Denken in Urlaub geschickt haben?<sup>129</sup>

This is the bind children are caught in under National Socialism, as per *Kindheitsmuster*. First, they are not capable of evaluating the world with the same level of critical judgment as adults (hence the narrator notes with irony that "in diesem Land Unschuld sich fast unfehlbar an Lebensjahren messen läßt").<sup>130</sup> Second, they are being raised by adults who ignore the implications and consequences of what they are teaching. Third, they are taught and expected to obey. Love is identified with obedience, and yet obedience to Nazi ideology has devastating consequences, both for the individual and for the very fabric of the society around them.

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<sup>128</sup> Wolf, *KM*, 191; 20.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, *KM*, 569.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

## Conclusion

For Christa Wolf, the child poses a particular problem when it comes to complicity and culpability. As she establishes throughout *Kindheitsmuster*, children are made vulnerable through their dependency on others, as well as through adults' need for their obedience. Given the child's limited ability to act in the world, this should lead one to conclude that children have limited culpability for the society of which they are a part. Yet though the narrator repeatedly attempts to approach this conclusion through her enumeration of the ways children are compelled to act in certain ways, she herself never feels it to be entirely true. At the end of the book, the past has not been laid to rest, but lives uneasily with the narrator in her writing. The shame of her childhood acceptance of the Nazi regime is too strong; haunting her narration is the suspicion that, had the Third Reich not collapsed, Nelly would have grown up to be fully implicated in its crimes. She might not have become a fanatic like Binder, but she would have gone on accepting and consenting to the state's crimes because her upbringing and environment taught and encouraged her to do so. *Kindheitsmuster* serves as a Brechtian model of self-examination in which Nelly is both a vehicle for wrestling with both the problems of writing literature and the specter of the person the narrator might have become.

## Chapter Two:

### Consumption and the Reproduction of Social Norms: Reading the Child in Herta Müller's Prose

In her 2010 Hoffmann-von-Fallersleben Preis acceptance speech, Herta Müller characterizes childhood as “wahrscheinlich der verworrenste Teil des Lebens. Es wird in daumenkleinen Details, die wir später mit einem glatten zweisilbigen Wort KINDHEIT nennen, so viel gleichzeitig aufgebaut und abgerissen wie später nie wieder.”<sup>1</sup> Childhood, for Müller, is a confused and confusing time, in which the child's experience collides with the emotional, social, and cultural narratives familiar to the adults around her. For Müller, claims about this tumultuous period of life often gloss over both the child's perspective on the world, and the myriad of ways she is socialized into adult life.

Müller pays careful attention to the experiences of the child (and especially the female child), often drawing on her own life experiences. For Müller, childhood should not be romanticized, and children should not be dismissed, but taken seriously. The child serves her prose as both a literary device and a vehicle for exploring corrosive familial and social dynamics; decaying social and political systems; and indoctrination and complicity. Yet Müller also refuses to make the child into a mere symbol or metaphor; her writing never loses sight of the emotional and psychic toll taken on children by abusive families, indifferent institutions, and cruel reproductive politics.

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<sup>1</sup> Herta Müller, “Denk nicht dorthin, wo du nicht sollst. Dankrede zur Verleihung des Hoffmann-von-Fallersleben Preises für zeitkritische Literatur,” in *Immer derselbe Schnee und immer derselbe Onkel* (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2011), 27.

Much has been written about the autobiographical and “autofictional” nature of Müller’s writing,<sup>2</sup> and her own experience indeed permeates the representations of children found in her prose. However, the children who populate her prose do more than stand in for the author herself. The children depicted in *Niederungen* (1982/4), her first collection of stories, and the novel *Herztier* (1994) reveal the brutality of life in Banat Swabia and throughout Communist Romania; they also reveal how children come to accept oppressive social systems as a means of survival. In addition to deepening an understanding of Müller’s social and political critiques, her use of the child in her nonfiction, particularly *Der Teufel sitzt im Spiegel. Wie Wahrnehmung sich erfindet* (1991), provides insights into Müller’s particular aesthetic, and how the child functions as a literary device in her prose.

### **Writing Against Multiple Traditions: Herta Müller, Banat Swabia, and Romanian Communism**

Although her work on the child resonates with portrayals found in Christa Wolf and Jenny Erpenbeck, it is important to note just how different Müller’s experiences and political views are from theirs. Though she too spent much of her life in the Eastern Bloc, even that experience was radically different from Wolf’s and Erpenbeck’s.

Müller came of age in Banat Swabia, an ethnically German region of Romania. Born in 1953, she belongs to the generation that grew up in the wake of familial and community traumas

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<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Paola Bozzi, “Facts, Fiction, Autofiction, and Surfiction in Herta Müller’s Work,” in *Herta Müller: Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. Bettina Brandt and Valentina Glajar (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 109–29; Bettina Brandt and Valentina Glajar, “Introduction,” in *ibid.*, 1–12; Brigid Haines, “‘Die akute Einsamkeit des Menschen’: Herta Müller’s *Herztier*,” in *ibid.*, 87–108; Olivia Spiridon, “From Fact to Fiction: Herta Müller’s *Atemschaudel*,” in *ibid.*, 130–52; and Katrin Kohl, “Beyond Realism: Herta Müller’s Poetics,” in *Herta Müller*, ed. Brigid Haines and Lyn Marven (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 16–31.

of the Second World War, impacted by the older generation's traumas but with no direct experience of the war itself. Müller's father fought in the Waffen-SS during the war, a legacy to which Müller repeatedly returns in her writing.<sup>3</sup> Müller was also among the first generation of children born to the German-Romanian survivors of Soviet labor camps. Declared by the Soviet Union to be collectively guilty for the war, ethnic Germans from across Eastern Europe—including civilians—were deported to Siberia for forced labor beginning in 1945. In Romania, all German men between the ages of 17 and 45 and all women between 17 and 35 were required to go to the USSR. Between 80 and 100,000 ethnic Germans were deported from Romania; an estimated twenty percent never returned.<sup>4</sup>

Among the deported was Müller's mother, then seventeen years old. In the afterword to *Atemschaukel* (2009), Müller recalls that “[n]ur in der Familie und mit engen Vertrauten, die selbst deportiert waren, wurde über die Lagerjahre gesprochen. Und auch dann nur in Andeutungen. Diese verstohlenen Gespräche haben meine Kindheit begleitet. Ihre Inhalte habe ich nicht verstanden, die Angst aber gespürt.”<sup>5</sup> Compounding this atmosphere of silence and fear was the Banat-Swabian community's resistance to change, engendering an atmosphere of ethnocentrism and intense pressure to conform.<sup>6</sup> Müller's depiction of village life is highly

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<sup>3</sup> Coincidentally, Müller's father was attached to the same division as the young Günter Grass. Katrin Hillgruber, “Der Himmel über dem Banat,” *Der Tagesspiegel*, April 29, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Ulrich Merten, *Forgotten Voices: The Expulsion of the Germans from Eastern Europe after World War II* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2012), 267. The Banat region suffered additional hardships in the early 1950s, in retaliation for its rebellion against the Communist government's collectivization policies. Between 30 and 40,000 people—mostly but not exclusively ethnic Germans—were compulsorily deported to the Baragan steppes in 1951, where they had to work on collective farms. Some were allowed to return in 1955, though their homes and property had already been expropriated and taken by others. See Merten, 274.

<sup>5</sup> “Nachwort,” in Herta Müller, *Atemschaukel* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2009), 299.

<sup>6</sup> See e.g. Müller's discussion of *Niederungen* in Herta Müller, *Der Teufel sitzt im Spiegel. Wie Wahrnehmung sich erfindet* (Berlin: Rotbuch Verlag, 1991), 20 - 1. Abbreviated hereafter as *Teufel*.

critical, causing intense backlash in that community.<sup>7</sup> As many scholars have pointed out, her portrayals constitute at once a critical response to the conformism of the Banat Swabian community and a repudiation of earlier generations of German-Romanian writers who portrayed rural life in a rosier light, drawing on the German literary tradition of *bürgerlicher Realismus*.<sup>8</sup>

Müller's writing also rebukes the dominant culture of Romanian Communism, which promoted propagandistic depictions of peasant-farmers in the tradition of Socialist Realism.<sup>9</sup> The concept of Socialist Realism has been subject to much rethinking in recent years; scholars have challenged the popularly-understood dichotomy between the literature of the Eastern Bloc (in this equation, characterized by Socialist Realism) and that of the West (usually represented by Modernist or Postmodernist literary techniques). In the context of East Germany, scholars such as Julia Hell have demonstrated how in practice, Socialist Realism was more complicated than portrayed in the Western media, and how writers described as Modernist (such as Christa Wolf) were more in dialogue with Realism than the contemporary Western discourse acknowledged.<sup>10</sup>

Romania's path to Socialist Realism diverged somewhat from that of the GDR. Unlike East Germany, where the Soviet sector of partitioned Germany was established as a Communist state only after the end of the Second World War, the Romanian Communist Party ascended to

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<sup>7</sup> Some of this backlash was spurned by the efforts of the Romanian secret police, the Securitate, who themselves wrote negative reviews of *Niederungen* upon its publication. See Bettina Brandt and Valentina Glajar, "Introduction," in Brandt and Glajar, *Herta Müller: Politics and Aesthetics*, 2-5.

<sup>8</sup> On the literary history of German-Romanian writers in the postwar period, see Olivia Spiridon, "Die rumäniendeutsche Literatur nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg. Eine Überblicksdarstellung," *Études Germaniques* 67, no. 3 (March 2012): 450-2.

<sup>9</sup> On the Romanian regime's use of rural fiction for propagandistic ends and Müller's critique of the Banat-Swabian community, see Cristina Petrescu, "When Dictatorships Fail to Deprive of Dignity: Herta Müller's 'Romanian Period,'" in Brandt and Glajar, *Herta Müller: Politics and Aesthetics*, 60-5

<sup>10</sup> See Julia Hell, *Post-Fascist Fantasies: Psychoanalysis, History, and the Literature of East Germany* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997). See also Chapter Two.

power earlier, when a coup deposed the pro-Fascist government of Ion Antonescu in 1944.<sup>11</sup> The coup led to Romania's switching sides in the war and allying with the USSR. In the immediate postwar period, that alliance would lead to the aforementioned deportation of ethnic Germans to the Soviet Union for forced labor, scapegoating a minority for the actions of Antonescu's government. Historian Dennis Deletant dates the beginnings of writers importing Socialist Realism to Romania in 1948, a year after the Romanian government (taking direction from Moscow) undertook a cultural purge of anything deemed 'anti-Soviet.'<sup>12</sup>

Examining the literary output of Romanian writers after 1948, Deletant deems the efforts of Romanian censorship largely successful, and notes the "blandness of intellectual dissent in Romania:" "This distinguishes it from that in most of the other East European states. Given the lack of sympathy for Marxism-Leninism amongst Romanians, this conformity is striking. [...] Opportunism fueled collaboration with the regime."<sup>13</sup> A generation after these purges, however, the social and cultural landscape had changed. Herta Müller came of age during a period of de-Stalinization and a relaxation of certain cultural policies, as shaped by the Ninth Party Congress of 1965.<sup>14</sup> However, that liberalization came to an end when Nicolae Ceaușescu consolidated power and rose to the head of the Romanian Communist Party and the Romanian state; the publication of his so-called "July Theses" (1971) is generally understood to mark the end of liberalization and a return to restrictive, repressive policies.<sup>15</sup> Ceaușescu understood his "Theses"

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<sup>11</sup> See Dennis Deletant, *Romania Under Communist Rule*, 2nd ed. (Portland, OR: The Center for Romanian Studies, 1999), 15 – 51.

<sup>12</sup> Dennis Deletant, "Cheating the Censor: Romanian Writers under Communism," *Central Europe* 6, no. 2 (2008): 125-6.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>14</sup> See *ibid.*, 132-4; and Norbert Otto Eke, "Augen/Blicke oder: Die Wahrnehmung der Welt in den Bildern. Annäherung an Herta Müller (Einleitung)," in *Die Erfundene Wahrnehmung. Annäherung an Herta Müller*, ed. Norbert Otto Eke (Paderborn: IGEL Verlag Wissenschaft, 1991), 8-10.

<sup>15</sup> See e.g. Deletant, *Romania under Communist Rule*, 111-6.

as a kind of “miniature Cultural Revolution,” and demanded a move toward “Socialist Humanism” in the realm of culture:

Socialist Humanism means the reflection of personal happiness in the context of the assertion of the personality of the entire people. Starting from there, art pervaded by Socialist Humanism must be dedicated to the mass of the people, in whose ranks personality is not lost, but where it asserts itself more and more powerfully as the entire nation and its happiness assert themselves.<sup>16</sup>

In practice, “Socialist Humanism” effectively meant a return to Socialist Realism.<sup>17</sup> These years of increasing repression, culminating with the implementation of a brutal regime of terror enforced by the Securitate (Romanian Secret Police), are also the years in which the young Herta Müller began writing (from 1969 onwards). Though Romanian writers initially presented a united front against Ceaușescu’s new policies, their solidarity collapsed as a result of infighting (partly engineered by the Party itself).<sup>18</sup> Deletant documents expressions of dissent by Romanian writers and the limitations of Western understanding of what was happening in Romania between 1971 and 1989,<sup>19</sup> but here it is important to return to the specific position of Herta Müller, and her outlook on the situation.

Herta Müller’s literary milieu was not the Romanian literary establishment, but other ethnic German artists, specifically the Aktionsgruppe Banat (1972-5), a group of dissident experimental writers. Although Müller was never formally a member, their influence on her work has been well documented.<sup>20</sup> Cristina Petrescu writes that the German language granted the members of the Aktionsgruppe “a window to the outside world:”

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<sup>16</sup> Nicolae Ceaușescu, quoted in Deletant, “Cheating the Censor,” 141-2.

<sup>17</sup> Deletant, “Cheating the Censor,” 141.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 142-4.

<sup>19</sup> See *ibid.*, 143 – 60; see also Deletant, *Romania under Communism*, 130-9.

<sup>20</sup> See e.g. Spiridon, 458; Petrescu, 67-8.



While they were in Romania, their mother tongue gave them access to a literature from the other side of the Iron Curtain, banned in Ceausescu's Romania but smuggled into the country by various travelers. This literature, radically different from the party-controlled publications [...] helped these German-language writers to emancipate their minds from the conformism enforced by the Communist regime. It taught them to think freely while living in a country that heavily restricted the freedom of thinking.<sup>21</sup>

Significantly, it is the German *language* that enables the group's radical departure from the norm, but not the German-Romanian literary tradition. The Aktionsgruppe rebelled against the previous generations of German-Romanian writers and the techniques they had developed to evade censorship in the years prior to liberalization.<sup>22</sup> Instead, the group looked to and adapted from other literary forebears, including Bertolt Brecht, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and the poets of the Wiener Gruppe.<sup>23</sup> Their interest in exploring the crimes of their fathers (many of whom, like Herta Müller's father, had fought for the Nazis) and their rejection of pastoralism also made them receptive to the literature of intergenerational conflict coming out of West Germany in the late 1960s, as well as the *Anti-Heimatliteratur* of West Germany, Austria, and Switzerland; specific influences included Peter Handke, Thomas Bernhard, Günter Grass, and Hans Magnus Enzensberger..<sup>24</sup> The group was uninterested in its Romanian counterparts, perceiving Romanian writers' efforts as conformist.<sup>25</sup> It is this situation, along with her understanding of Socialist Realism, that Herta Müller's writing addresses, even if the actual historical situation was more complicated.

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<sup>21</sup> Petrescu, 69.

<sup>22</sup> See Spiridon, 453-5.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 454. Spiridon notes that “[l]iterarische Erneuerungen aus der DDR beeinflussten auch ihre Dichtung,” but does not elaborate on which authors or what aspects of their work proved influential for the Aktionsgruppe.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 454-5; and Ernst Wichner, interview by Valentina Glajar and Bettina Brandt, “Interview with Ernst Wichner,” in Brandt and Glajar, *Herta Müller: Politics and Aesthetics*, 38-9

<sup>25</sup> See Wichner, 38-42.

Examining Müller's writing in light of these two dominant literary and cultural traditions (Romanian Socialist Realism on the one hand, German-Romanian literature on the other) reveals how her politics further set her apart from the other authors under discussion in this dissertation. Unlike Wolf, who was critical of the East German regime but ultimately believed in the promise of socialism, and whose style of resistance and critique has been the subject of much debate,<sup>26</sup> or Erpenbeck, who came from a family of GDR writers and only began writing after the end of the Cold War, Müller was a firm dissident, and an outsider. Not only was she ethnically German, learning Romanian as her second language, but her outright refusal to collaborate with the Romanian secret police resulted in intense professional and personal repercussions, even after she eventually emigrated to West Germany. Müller never joined a state-sanctioned writers' organization, nor did she write for primarily Romanian audiences.

Furthermore, Müller, unlike Wolf and other GDR writers, had no interest in the promises of socialism in the abstract. Describing her frustration with people who argue about socialism in theory, she explains her rejection of utopianism in all its forms:

Die Ideologie des Sozialismus war eine angewandte Utopie. Die angewandte Utopie ergab eine Diktatur. Jede Utopie, die das Papier verläßt und sich zwischen Menschen stellt, uniformiert die nackte Unzähligkeit der Versuche, ein Leben zu finden, das man aushält. [...] Anders als das Wort Utopie ist meine Furcht davor nicht abstrakt. Sie weiß, woher sie kommt und wovon sie reden muß, nämlich von dem, was im Namen dieses Wortes geschehen ist.<sup>27</sup>

In Müller's work, there is no melancholy at the gap between ideal and its implementation, nor any hope of large-scale structural transformation (the most characters hope for is the death of Ceaușescu). For her, dictatorship is the result of "applied utopia" ("angewandte Utopie"); the

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<sup>26</sup> See Chapter One.

<sup>27</sup> Herta Müller, "Zehn Finger werden keine Utopie," in *Hunger und Seide. Essays*. (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1995), 50.

socialist dictatorships of the Eastern Bloc are evidence of what happens when utopia goes from theory to practice, and she rejects the leftist argument that, if only properly implemented, socialism might still work. These, she writes, are abstract claims, and she sets the abstract against the concrete: namely, her own personal experiences of being terrorized by the Romanian regime. These experiences—concrete, lived, felt—preceded an intellectual understanding of ideology, and therefore became Müller’s means of resisting the narratives imposed by totalitarianism:

Ich hatte den langen Faden nie, um das Netz zu spannen, das viele Menschen auffängt. Dafür aber hatte ich die Mühe mit den kleinsten Schritten, Worten und Gesten. Ich bestand aus lauter Nichtigkeiten, weil ich Genauigkeit brauchte, um mich nicht schuldig zu machen. Ich war darauf angewiesen, das, was geschah, zu überprüfen.<sup>28</sup>

She clings to “Genauigkeit” in order to counteract the web that entangles so many others in ideological narratives. Her emphasis on details keeps her from totalizing narratives. Instead, it makes her “ein Feind des Ganzen;” she explains that “[w]er im Detail leben mußte, stellte nur Hürden auf für das Ganze. [...] Als Kind und später als Übersetzerin in der Fabrik, als Lehrerin in der Schule war ich immer schuldig. Ich wußte immer, daß ich nicht entsprach.”<sup>29</sup> Her language here recalls and rebukes Ceaușescu’s formulation of Socialist Humanism in the “July Theses” and his repeated emphasis on “the personality of the entire people,” “the mass of people,” and “the entire nation.” In connecting her childhood to her later experiences as an adult, Müller makes “das Ganze” refer not only to the Communist regime’s totalizing narratives, but also to the Banat Swabian community’s ethnocentrism and conformity. Building her aesthetic on the concrete enables Müller to stay out of the web, to keep from being complicit in violence of the society around her.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 53-4.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 59.

This aesthetic sets her even further apart from writers like Wolf and Erpenbeck. In Wolf's *Kindheitsmuster*, the narrator almost compulsively interlaces each scene with metacommentary; she is obsessed with the mediated quality of memory, and how time may have distorted the stories she recalls. Müller, by contrast, is less interested in the veracity of memory; her concerns about truth lie elsewhere. Unlike Wolf, whose central concern in *Kindheitsmuster* is whether the past in all its complexity can be represented in a way that eschews the "romanhaft," Müller uses detail and imagery to illustrate the repressive mechanisms at work in both Banat Swabian culture and the Communist Romanian regime.

The contrast with Erpenbeck, as we shall see in Chapter Three, is even more stark. Erpenbeck departs from the autobiographical/autofictional concerns of both Wolf and Müller, instead constructing almost fablelike tales of closed societies. Even as she shares many thematic interests with Müller (the refusal of reproductive futurism; the dark undercurrents of children's culture), Erpenbeck's narratives ultimately have more in common with Wolf's, in that they are also interested in memory, complicity, and the broader social structures at work in building and enforcing repressive societies.

Yet what Müller shares with these authors is an interest in what it means to come of age in an authoritarian society; the collapse of states and societies; the inner lives of girls; and the narrative possibilities opened up by representations of children and childhood. Müller's understanding of how children experience the world, namely "in daumenkleinen Details," echoes the aesthetic she developed in the face of the totalizing narratives she experienced in Romania—the imperative to foreground lived experience and the "smallest" words and gestures. Children, therefore, become a useful vehicle in both her essays and her fiction for representing life in an

oppressive society, and for communicating larger ideas about narrative and consciousness without resorting to the “Netz” in which so many others are caught.

### **“Es war damals ein anderer Blick:”<sup>30</sup> The Mind of Child as Narrative Device**

The figure of the child often appears in Müller’s essays and lectures about the practice of writing, especially as a vehicle for explaining her ideas about perception and the construction of narrative. In a lecture series, later collected and published as *Der Teufel sitzt im Spiegel. Wie Wahrnehmung sich erfindet*, Müller makes frequent use of the child as a means of explaining her aesthetic of detail and her broader understanding of how the mind turns perception and experience into narrative. For Müller, the retrospective appellation of “childhood” to this process obscures both the mechanism by which a person comes to unconsciously order raw experience into received narratives, and the lived experiences of children who must construct new understandings of the world every day.

In *Der Teufel sitzt im Spiegel*, Müller devotes a great deal of time to discussing childhood. She explains how children perceive the world, providing a counterexample to the processes of adult thought:

Weil man als Kind so klein ist, sucht man sich, um die Welt zu begreifen, die größten Maschen aus. Und, weil es die größten Maschen sind, sind es immer auch die feinsten. Es ist eine Verkürzung der Dinge, die keine Maßstäbe hat und auch keine braucht. Eine verblüffende Eigentlichkeit, die die Welt zu dem macht, was hinter der Stirn geschieht. Zu dieser Eigentlichkeit ist man später nur noch selten und bedingt fähig.<sup>31</sup>

Although she attributes a specific kind of authenticity to children in this passage (“eine verblüffende Eigentlichkeit”), she quickly qualifies the statement, adding: “[i]ch halte nicht viel

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<sup>30</sup> Müller, *Teufel*, 12.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

von der magischen Seite der Kindheit, ist sie doch nichts als die früheste Form des Erwachsenseins, falls es Erwachsensein überhaupt gibt.”<sup>32</sup> Not only is there nothing magical about childhood, but, as in her Hoffmann-von-Fallersleben Preis speech, she finds the category of childhood itself questionable.

Within the space of a few sentences, Müller seems to adopt two contradictory approaches to children’s perception. One claims the uniqueness of the child’s mind and is characterized by recognizable tropes: authenticity; an understanding of the world without “standards” or “measurements” (“Maßstäbe;” implicitly, a kind of access to the world without the mediation of abstract concepts); and a mindset notably different from that of adults. The other, however, rejects the romanticization of childhood, and even questions whether one can speak of a meaningful difference between children and adults. Over the course of the essay, Müller attempts to resolve this apparent contradiction, interweaving with her own experiences of growing up in rural Banat Swabia, and the writing of her first book, *Niederungen* (1982/84), a collection of stories, many of which take place in this region.

The tension between these two approaches provides a fitting point of entry for thinking about Müller’s use of the child in her essays and fiction, specifically in *Niederungen* and *Herztier*. The stories in *Niederungen* and the passages in *Herztier* dealing with children likewise draw on familiar tropes, such as innocence and play, yet the narration uses these elements to bring out the uncanny and sinister sides of village and family life, as well as socialization into and complicity with authoritarian societies. Her use of the child in *Der Teufel sitzt im Spiegel* provides a framework for understanding how the child fits into her narrative aesthetic, which in turn can shed light on the strategies at work in *Niederungen* and *Herztier*.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 12.

Young children, Müller says, lack the abstract categories (“Maßstäbe”) adults use to order their worlds, an argument she has repeated elsewhere, saying “als Kind hat man ja auch keine abstrakten Begriffe im Kopf. Wenn man dann erwachsen ist, stellt sich die Sache im Rückblick natürlich anders dar.”<sup>33</sup> In childhood, Müller writes, one amasses experiences in this way, a collection of moments [*Augenblicke*]. It is only with time and in retrospection [*Rückblick*], that one orders these experiences into a personal narrative. Here we can begin to make sense of her claim that children possess both “eine verblüffende Eigentlichkeit,” and her assertion that she sees nothing magical about childhood. It is not that children inherently possess a unique ability that is forever lost as they age. Instead, Müller understands childhood as a point in time in which the mind is open to multiple possibilities but does not yet have the distance or input from the outside world to order these things into larger social or political narratives; the child, for a time, has more freedom (but not absolute freedom), to process experiences without interference or internalized ideas about the world.

As children grow up, they are taught how to process their experience through socialization, education, and indoctrination. Müller finds processes of indoctrination under totalitarian regimes particularly insidious, recalling in another essay: “Diese Kontrolle fing in einem Alter an, in dem bewußtes Abweichen vom Schnittmuster des Bewußtseins noch gar nicht möglich war. Wir waren Kinder, und unser Denken wurde als ‘Bewußtsein’ eingestuft und abgewürgt.”<sup>34</sup> The project of a repressive society (be it a village in the country or a dictatorship) is to interfere with the very core of being and consciousness in order to produce obedient, willing subjects. It begins at an age at which children are eager to please, open to belief, not yet

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<sup>33</sup> Herta Müller, “‘Fremdsein kann ich vor meinem Kleiderschrank oder auf dem Bahnhof.’ Ein Interview mit der rumäniendeutschen Schriftstellerin Herta Müller,” *Drei Raben - Zeitschrift für ungarische Kultur*, no. 7 (2005): 128.

<sup>34</sup> Müller, “Zehn Finger werden keine Utopie,” 56.

rebellious, and therefore unlikely to seriously resist these efforts. These received narratives are powerful because they are internalized and, once internalized, become invisible to the individual.<sup>35</sup>

The child also serves Müller as a useful device in illustrating her concept of “erfundene Wahrnehmung.” Often, the “child” in question is Müller herself. Much has been made of her tendency to draw on her own experiences in her writing, including her own designation of her work as “autofictional.”<sup>36</sup> While the autobiographical is undeniably significant to her work, it is also important to bear in mind that *Der Teufel sitzt im Spiegel* is itself a literary text; Norbert Otto Eke writes that the essays are “angesiedelt im Grenzbereich zwischen ästhetischer Theorie und künstlerischer Praxis. Poetischer und theoretischer Diskurs durchdringen sich und erscheinen als zwei Seiten des einen Werks.”<sup>37</sup> In the lectures, Müller herself emphasizes the role of imagination and literary creation, recounting her irritation with people who asked to see the town where she grew up. Those people, she writes, didn’t want to see the location of her actual childhood, but the village from *Niederungen*. Those she brought to Nițhidorf were annoyed and disappointed by the sight of the clean, orderly village, telling her, “Ich hab mir das Dorf anders vorgestellt.”<sup>38</sup> Müller continues, “Das Dorf gibt es nur in den *Niederungen*, hab ich gesagt. Sie glaubten mir nicht.”<sup>39</sup> Müller’s representation of herself as a child should be understood in similar terms—not only as autobiographical, but also as a literary construct.

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. Freud on the development of the super-ego [*Über-Ich* or *Ichideal*], in Sigmund Freud, *Das Ich und das Es*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Anna Freud, vol. 13 (1923; London: Imago Publishing, 1952), 256-67. See also below.

<sup>36</sup> On Müller’s “autofiction,” see Paola Bozzi, “Facts, Fiction, Autofiction, and Surfiction in Herta Müller’s Work,” in Brandt and Glajar, *Herta Müller: Politics and Aesthetics*, 109–29; on Müller’s theory and life-writing, see Katrin Kohl, “Beyond Realism: Herta Müller’s Poetics,” in Haines and Marven, *Herta Müller*, 16–31.

<sup>37</sup> Eke, 18.

<sup>38</sup> Müller, *Teufel*, 16.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.



Müller uses the child to introduce her concept of “erfundene Wahrnehmung” by way of an early memory of praying with her grandmother in front of an oil painting of a saint [*Heiligenbild*]. Young Müller was impressed not by the holy figure, but by the threatening landscape in the background, mistaking some stones for cucumbers:

Große braune Steine. [...] Sie wurden bedrohlich, weil sie die Grenzen der Steine überschritten. Ich sah in diesen Steinen braune, überreife Gurken. Nur vor ihnen hatte ich Angst. Ich wußte jeden Abend, daß die überreifen Gurken in der Nacht platzen. Daß sie sich, wenn sie platzen, über das Zimmer ergießen, über das Haus. Und, daß sie uns alle vergiften.<sup>40</sup>

Here is a bizarre, almost surrealist image of a child’s misunderstanding. Not only does she mistake inorganic stones for organic vegetable matter, she believes that the static, limited area of the painting has the ability to exceed its own boundaries, and in so doing, escape into reality and poison everyone in the house. While her grandmother prays for the absolution of sin, Müller prays that the cucumbers will not destroy the family in their sleep.

The anecdote plays into the reader’s expectations of children. The young Herta Müller’s interpretation of stones as cucumbers, and apparent inability to grasp that a representation of an image cannot have the same real-world effect as the object it represents, seems like an example of childish thinking: an inability to clearly distinguish the borders of fantasy and reality. Tonally reminiscent of a folk or fairy tale, her fear of the cucumbers is at once absurd and menacing, ridiculous and haunting. Yet for all the absurdity of the image, the reader easily accepts this as nothing out of the ordinary—the mere imaginings of a child.

Around the age of ten, Müller suddenly perceives the image for what it is and never sees the stones as cucumbers again. She loses access to the aspect of herself allowed her to perceive the stones as a threat:

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 11-2.

Ich konnte [die Wahrnehmung] nicht mehr so erfinden, wie sie sich seinerzeit selbst erfunden hatte. Es war damals ein anderer Blick, der hatte auch mich erfunden, da ich durch ihn eine andere Person gewesen war: die gröbste Masche war die feinste. Weil ich damals ein Kind war. Vielleicht.<sup>41</sup>

In her telling, she is not an agent or grammatical subject; she does not do the perceiving. Instead she describes perception using a reflexive construction [*sich erfinden*], meaning it invents itself, as if the process were external or inaccessible to her childhood self. More than that, her mode of perception had the effect of inventing *her*, because it inspired a fear that would come to characterize her memory of that time, and the memory of praying before that image with her grandmother. At the end of the anecdote, it seems that she will attribute the episode to her childish mind, but she undercuts this expectation with a final word of doubt—“Vielleicht.”

In fact, this is not the lesson she wants the reader to draw from her story, which she immediately follows with the above-quoted disavowal of any “magical” side of childhood. First, experiences like the one she describes with the painting are not flights of fancy or daydreams. Daydreams and play involve a degree of autonomy and conscious will on the child’s part, which is not present here. Second, although they are misapprehensions, the child does not realize this, and her misapprehensions effectively become reality, coloring her inner emotional life. Yet even though the threat of the cucumbers seems real to the young Müller, she also knows that her grandmother and other family members do not see what she sees, and this early sense of self-awareness (what might be understood in psychological terms as the child’s developing theory of mind) scares her more than the actual threat posed by the prospect of poisoning.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 12.

Instinctively, Müller knows she must hide her thoughts from others, lest she be declared “krank” or “verrückt.”<sup>42</sup> Growing up in a small village, the young Müller desperately wants to belong, for the only alternative would be social isolation. Deception becomes a daily practice:

Das Täuschen war die Arbeit meiner Kindheit. [...] Darum wurde alles falsch, konnte nicht mehr sein als der Schein des Dazugehörens. [...] Doch man sah nicht so genau hin, weil man mit der Täuschung nicht rechnete. Oder, wie ich heute glaube, war jeder für sich, gegenüber dem anderen, mit seiner eigenen Täuschung beschäftigt.<sup>43</sup>

“Erfundene Wahrnehmung” becomes the occasion for the child’s introduction to self-regulation and self-policing as a means of finding acceptance in the social order. She does not need to be told to do this; it is something she intuits or infers based on her previous experience of village life. Only later does Müller come to suspect that every individual was engaged in a similar practice of hiding their individual thoughts and presenting a different face to the outside world. The process is not about fantasy or play, but “soziale Angst.”<sup>44</sup> Like her vision of overripe cucumbers bursting and spilling out over the borders of the picture, the consequences of individuals’ private “invented perceptions” go beyond their individual lives, affecting the social fabric of the village.

This conflict between her inner, emotional life and the external pressures of the world around her has a clear analog in psychoanalytic theories of development: namely, the formation of the super-ego or ego idea [*Über-Ich* and *Ich-Ideal*] as a mechanism that internalizes external authorities (first familial, then social).<sup>45</sup> Sigmund Freud describes this process in *Das Ich und das Es* (1923):

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>45</sup> See Sigmund Freud, *Das Ich und das Es*, 256-67.

Im weiteren Verlauf der Entwicklung haben Lehrer und Autoritäten die Vaterrelle [*sic*] fortgeführt; deren Gebote und Verbote sind im Ideal-Ich mächtig geblieben und üben jetzt als Gewissen die moralische Zensur aus. Die Spannung zwischen den Ansprüchen des Gewissens und den Leistungen des Ichs wird als Schuldgefühl empfunden.<sup>46</sup>

Müller describes in vivid, visceral terms a normative process of childhood development, in which the child becomes conscious of the disjunction between her inner life and the world around her. Generally speaking, all children at some point become familiarized with and internalize the rules and norms of their society. However, Müller's description of her own childhood has an additional political dimension: because she grew up in a highly repressive and culturally homogenous community, the stakes of conformity—and the consequences for deviance—were much higher. Müller uses the cucumber story to help the reader understand the repressive nature of village life (and by extension, authoritarianism) by relating it to a more familiar psychological process. In other words, the episode simultaneously illustrates two interrelated processes: the child's developing awareness of the external world, and the intensified pressure experienced under an authoritarian or closed society.

Although Müller sees such obvious misapprehensions of reality as more characteristic of childhood, "erfundene Wahrnehmung" does not end there: "in jedem Alter gibt es die Wahrnehmung, die sich erfindet. Das, was wir sehen, überschreitet seine Grenzen."<sup>47</sup> In fact, the phenomenon is integral to her process as a writer; it is a partly inexplicable process that allows her a way into her fictional and poetic works.<sup>48</sup> It is an intuitive, not-entirely-conscious mental process that provides her a point of entry (often in the form of an image or bit of language) into the act of creation.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 265.

<sup>47</sup> Müller, *Teufel*, 15.

<sup>48</sup> See *ibid.*, 40 – 55.

If “erfundene Wahrnehmung” is not unique to childhood, this raises the question of why Müller chooses to begin there in an essay about her work as a writer, and what using the child accomplishes for her in this essay. By using an example from childhood, Müller provides the reader an accessible means of entry into her otherwise “characteristically unsystematic” theory of perception and language.<sup>49</sup> The reader recognizes her description of misperceiving the painting as an ordinary occurrence in the life of a child: while the specifics and the image of the cucumbers are themselves striking and memorable, the idea that a child would have this train of thought is unsurprising. The same occurrence in an adult, as Müller points out, would be considered an abnormality. The reader, however, can more easily accept this from a child, which allows Müller to lay the foundation for her explanation of “erfundene Wahrnehmung.”

Later, when she describes how she encounters “erfundene Wahrnehmung” in adulthood, the reader is more prepared to accept the bizarreness of the anecdote. Three years after writing *Niederungen*, while waiting at a train station, Müller sees something that reminds her of images she had used in her stories:

daß auf dem Boden viele, viele Frösche saßen. [...] Ich sah die Frösche aus meinen eigenen Sätzen [in *Niederungen*]. Und ich hörte den Satz: ‘Jeder hat bei der Einwanderung einen Frosch mitgebracht’ [...]. Ich wußte, jetzt hat das Erfundene mich eingeholt. Jetzt waren die Frösche aus den Sätzen heraus, in mein Leben gekrochen. Und meine Angst war größer als ich selbst, denn ich war überzeugt, alles, was ich je an Wahrnehmung erfunden hatte, würde war, würde wirklich werden. [...] Jeder Satz, den ich geschrieben hab, wird mich streifen.<sup>50</sup>

Müller’s own words appear to have left her fiction and entered reality—the exact thing she feared as a child when she looked up at the painting and saw overripe cucumbers. Having created the metaphor of the German frog in her fiction, frogs take on this added significance in real life.

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<sup>49</sup> Kohl, 28.

<sup>50</sup> Müller, *Teufel*, 51.

Not only do these real frogs carry the meaning she imparted to them in *Niederungen*, but they also show that her writing will not stay separate from her lived experience. Her past act of invention and creation will not stay in the past; and even though her ‘German frog’ was fantastical, the fantastic has the ability to intrude on reality because a person’s inner life inevitably colors how they see the world around them. This is not a break with reality or ‘childish’ thinking (mistaking fantasy for reality), but a kind of overdetermination: meaning created in fiction exceeds the boundaries of literature and imbues everyday phenomena and personal experiences with new layers of significance. For Müller, a frog is not just a frog, but a reminder of her heritage and how she translated that legacy into writing.

With the childhood anecdote, Müller prepares the reader for her later explanation of “erfundene Wahrnehmung,” and at the same time undercuts expectations by imbuing the child with a far greater sense of nuance and depth of understanding than ordinarily attributed to children. Despite her anxiety about the overripe cucumbers, the young Müller senses that she is the only one to see the painting this way, and that no one else shares her fears: “Was ich im nachhinein noch genau weiß, was mich daran erschreckt, ist, daß ich damals nicht vor der erfundenen Wahrnehmung Angst hatte, sondern vor der Tatsache, daß man das weiß.”<sup>51</sup> Even in her fear, she displays a level of self-awareness more typically attributed to adults than children. She is aware that her perception does not align with reality, and is more concerned that others might discover what she thinks.<sup>52</sup> “Erfundene Wahrnehmung” therefore becomes an occasion not only for awareness of the disjunction between perception and reality in the abstract, but also for

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>52</sup> The grammatical construction of the final sub-clause (“daß man das weiß”) creates an ambiguity in discerning the antecedent of the pronoun “das,” such that the clause could arguably be understood to indicate a more existential fear, namely a fear of the knowledge she perceives reality incorrectly. The subsequent paragraph deals exclusively with concerns about sociality and belonging, suggesting that this is the source of her fear. However, these readings are not necessarily incompatible with one another.

awareness of internalized mechanisms of conformity and social control. This awareness, how it affects the child's emotional and intellectual development, and its relationship to the experience of a repressive society, is more fully explored in her fiction.

### **The Child's-Eye View: Representing Children in *Niederungen***

In *Niederungen*, her first collection of stories, Müller frequently thematizes childhood, socialization in a closed society, and the feeling of being raised in a doomed way of life. The collection as a whole<sup>53</sup> begins with stories focused on the microcosms of childhood and family; as the collection progresses, the focus of the pieces widens, examining the broader dynamics that characterize village life; the surveillance state; and urban life. As the book progresses, so too do the stories' protagonists become older. The first story, "Die Grabrede," deals with a girl's nightmare about villagers holding her accountable for her ex-SS officer father's crimes at his funeral; the final story, "Arbeitstag," the adult narrator lives in a city and holds a job, but experiences time warped and backwards.

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<sup>53</sup> Multiple, differing editions of the collection have appeared under the same name since the book's initial publication in 1982. The first edition was published in Bucharest by the German-language press Kriterion. In 1984, Rotbuch published a significantly edited version of the book in West Berlin. The West German version excised four stories from the collection and shortened much of the remaining material. The Rotbuch edition—which would be frequently reprinted in the years following its initial publication—focuses most strongly on village and family life in Banat-Swabia. The editors accentuated the negative, excising anything deemed too idyllic; they also "corrected" Müller's stylistic choices, concerned that West German audiences might think she didn't fully grasp the German language. The effect of this editorial direction was to encourage readers to approach the texts as realist and informative rather than aesthetic, an approach Müller herself rejects in *Der Teufel sitzt im Spiegel*. In recent years, a new edition was produced in collaboration with Müller. Considered definitive, it restores the four excised stories, as well as a number of passages stricken from the 1984 edition. This dissertation cites this most recent edition, as it is more complete than the Rotbuch version and best conforms to the author's wishes. For an overview of the publication history and the new edition, see "Notiz," in Herta Müller, *Niederungen. Prosa* (1982/4; revised edition, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2011), n.p. For a more detailed discussion of the changes made by Rotbuch and their effects on the book's reception in the West, see Wiebke Sievers, "Von der rumäniendeutschen Anti-Heimat zum Inbild kommunistischen Grauens: Die Rezeption Herta Müllers in der BRD, in Großbritannien, in Frankreich und in den USA," *German Monitor* 68, no. 1 (2007): 299–316. For a side-by-side comparison of the 1982 and 1984 versions of the title story, "Niederungen," and the stylistic effects of these changes, see Julia Müller, 160 – 178.

Permeating the stories about childhood is a sense of futility and a lack of a viable future. Both the social and natural environs are sick, decaying, and dying. In “Meine Familie,” the narrator (a child) matter-of-factly describes her family’s unhappiness and open secrets. Her mother is “ein vermummtes Weib;” her father is a philanderer who has fathered a child with another woman.<sup>54</sup> She goes on to describe insidious village rumors about her family—of adultery, incest, and murder—which essentially make up the whole of her narrative and understanding of her family. In “Mutter, Vater, und der Kleine,” the third-person narrator contrasts the unhappiness of a family vacationing on the Black Sea coast with the sunny, happy postcards they write describing their trip.<sup>55</sup>

The experience of growing up in this environment is explored most fully in the collection’s title story. Narrated in the first person, “Niederungen” follows a girl of indeterminate age through vignettes of rural life. These scenes are not offered in chronological order, nor is there a plot tying them all together in a cohesive narrative. “Niederungen” alternates between present- and past-tense narration, sometimes within the same passage.<sup>56</sup>

For most of the story, Müller’s style mimics what she elsewhere describes as the child’s mode of perceiving the world: “in daumenkleinen Details,” “in den größten [und feinsten] Maschen,” “die keine Maßstäbe hat.” The narrator of “Niederungen” relates her world in much the same manner—she presents a collection of impressions, observations, and feelings, usually refusing to impose a larger narrative onto them or connect them through a story arc.

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<sup>54</sup> Müller, “Meine Familie,” in *Niederungen*, 15.

<sup>55</sup> Müller, “Mutter, Vater, und der Kleine,” in *Niederungen*, 147-50.

<sup>56</sup> The childhood scenes in Müller’s 1994 novel *Herztier* draw on much of the same content as “Niederungen,” but the novel displays a greater stylistic consistency, with nearly all of the flashbacks narrated in third-person present tense. Interspersed in scenes from the narrative present, the flashbacks usually tie in directly to the main action of the story.



“Niederungen” relies largely on its reader to understand the text as a whole, inviting the reader to participate in sense-making rather than supplying meaning. The narrator is simultaneously familiar with the world around her and at the same time not yet fully integrated into the social order, she is able to make it strange, or *unheimlich*: both home and not-home.<sup>57</sup> The net effect is to give an impressionistic, child’s-eye view of the everyday violence of village life. Müller focuses on the immediacy of the child’s experiences and uses those to suggest the social and emotional dynamics at work rather than spell them out.

However, although the narrator approximates the perspective of a child, one temporal marker indicates that she is actually retrospectively narrating the events of her childhood. Comparing the experience of death in the village (which she understands as taking place indoors, behind closed doors), she says, “[s]päter, als ich in die Stadt kam, sah ich das Sterben auf der Straßen, ehe es noch fertig war.”<sup>58</sup> She then relates traveling through the city alone via street car, which makes it unlikely that she is referring to an episode from childhood. Although her narration approximates that of a child’s, as an adult, she is able to furnish the reader with information that the child might not have considered, giving the reader a broader perspective than the child alone could have supplied. The “child’s-eye view” thus recreates the child’s sense of immediate experience without full awareness of larger social structures, while the influence of the adult perspective helps guide the reader in contextualizing and understanding the psychological, social, and political dynamics the child cannot yet perceive.

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<sup>57</sup> See Freud, “Das Unheimliche,” in *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Anna Freud, vol. 12, (London: Imago Publishing, 1952), especially 237 and 254.

<sup>58</sup> Müller, “Niederungen,” 28.

### *Consumption and the Economy of Childhood*

Much of what the reader comes to understand about the girl's family and life in the village is mediated through her interactions with and observations of animals. Next to her family, these are the creatures with whom the protagonist has the most frequent interaction. Sources of amusement, labor, and sustenance, the animals—and especially young animals—are also often the objects of violence.<sup>59</sup> This violence illustrates the lack of understanding and communication between the child and adults around her. These incidents also provide opportunity for insights into Müller's construction of the child, particularly childhood "innocence."

Almost immediately, the narrator's young age and dearth of understanding are established by her play with some kittens, whom she dresses in doll clothes. Apparently not realizing the clothes are too tight, the kittens begin to suffocate, and her grandfather must cut them free.<sup>60</sup> She does not appear to act out of malice, but out of ignorance of the consequences of her actions. The narrator does not explain this, instead leaving it to the reader to infer, a strategy Müller employs throughout most of the story.

Later, however, the narrator comes to identify more closely with young animals. One of the story's most significant moments comes when the narrator witnesses the death of her family's calf. Located at the center of the text, the scene is also the most detailed of any of the narrator's encounters with animals, and one of the rare moments when she discusses her feelings rather than simply relating the episode to the reader without commentary, as with the example of the kittens above. It is also one of the only moments in which the narrator becomes aware of a world beyond the village. The narrator's father—already known to the reader as an abusive,

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<sup>59</sup> See e.g. *ibid.*, 29 – 30, 34, 76, 81, and 87 – 8.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

alcoholic ex-Nazi—wants to slaughter the calf, but the Romanian government officially forbids killing livestock without permission. The father hits on a particularly cruel solution to this dilemma:

Am Morgen hatte Vater dem Kalb mit einem Hackenstiel das Bein durchgehackt. Darauf ging er den Tierarzt holen. [...] Vater erklärte dem Tierarzt auf rumänisch, wie sich das Kalb den Fuß in der Kette an der Futterkrippe verfangen hatte, wie es dann nicht mehr herausfand, wie es mit dem ganzen Körper über die Stange fiel und sich das Bein abriß.<sup>61</sup>

As he talks to the veterinarian—present not to treat the animal but as a representative of the Romanian government—he strokes the calf’s back, an action which infuriates his daughter. Normally either fearful of her father or starved for his affection, the narrator experiences a rare moment of rage at him: “Ich wollte seine Hand von dem Kalbsrücken stoßen, ich wollte seine Hand in den Hof werfen und sie zertreten. [...] Vater war ein Lügner. Alle, die da standen, logen durch ihr Schweigen.”<sup>62</sup> Not only does she see the father as a liar, but she implicates everyone in the community who has gathered for this scene and said nothing. But her anger is not only directed outward; she knows that she, too, is guilty for not speaking up.<sup>63</sup> Even the veterinarian seems to know the story is a lie, for the father then bribes him in order to get official permission for an emergency slaughter of the calf.<sup>64</sup>

The narrator must then be present as the family prepares to slaughter the calf; though she runs away at the actual moment of slaughter, she later finds its eyes, and her parents make her a bedside rug out of its hide.<sup>65</sup> Significantly, though her parents do not mind her presence at the

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 63-4.

slaughter, earlier in the story, they prohibit her from being present at the calf's birth.<sup>66</sup> Though she regularly encounters death, sexuality remains something from which she must be protected. Indeed, throughout the story she finds the sight of secondary sexual characteristics unsettling or even disgusting (including the sight of her male relatives' hairy arms as they prepare to slaughter the calf), regardless of gender.<sup>67</sup> In contrast to the reproductive capabilities of the animals all around her, the narrator notes that her parents' marriage is unhappy, abusive, and largely sexless due to the father's alcoholism.<sup>68</sup>

Her revulsion at the calf's slaughter becomes a source of tension between the narrator and her mother. When her mother brings the "kuhwarme Milch" into the house, the narrator can only think of the cow's grief at the loss of her young: "Ich fragte sie [Mutter], ob auch sie traurig wäre, wenn man mich ihr wegnehmen, mich schlachten würde. Ich fiel an die Kastentür, ich hatte eine geschwollene Oberlippe und einen violetten Fleck auf dem Arm. All das von der Ohrfeige."<sup>69</sup> The girl identifies with the calf and therefore identifies the cow with her mother, wondering if she would react the same way.

This is not the girl's first experience of death. It is ubiquitous in the village, and she understands that intuitively even before she learns the word "death" itself: "[i]ch verstand es, ohne es jemals vorher gehört zu haben. Ich trug es mit mir herum tagelang, und ich sah in jedem Stück Huhn, das in der Suppe lag, eine Leiche."<sup>70</sup> While she describes the thought of dead chicken in matter-of-fact terms, the milk evokes feelings of guilt and mistrust. Obtaining a steady

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>67</sup> See *ibid.*, 20, 46, 53, 87, 90.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 19-20.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

supply of milk requires the cow to be alive, to have offspring, and for that offspring to be taken away so that it doesn't consume her milk. Both the calf's death and the cow's grief strike the narrator as cruel; when looking into a pail of fresh milk after the slaughtering of the calf, she thinks, "[e]s hätte Blut darin sein müssen."<sup>71</sup> What the narrator learns here—and what upsets her—is the nature of the adult life into which she is growing: brutality and death are intimately entangled with the economic order and the sustenance of her own life.

Furthermore, what she perceives as her mother's lack of empathy stems from her mother's experiences of extreme hunger and hardship. Near the end of the story, the narrator reveals that her mother spent time in a Soviet labor camp. Imagining her mother "durchsichtig vor Hunger, ausgezehrt und faltig wie ein müdes, bewusstloses Mädchen," she implicitly offers another perspective on her mother's earlier lack of empathy for the cow.<sup>72</sup> The mother's experience of starvation makes her angry with the child who cannot appreciate fresh milk. The calf episode reveals the intergenerational conflict stemming from the vast differences in adult and child life experiences, leaving them unable to understand or communicate with one another.

Characteristic of the story as a whole, the narrator offers the reader scraps of key information out of chronological order. Over the course of "Niederungen," the girl gleans insights into her family and society: the connection between violence and sustenance; the relationship between the village and the Romanian government; taboos around sexuality and reproduction; and the reasons behind her parents' violent, disproportionate responses to their child's behavior. The reading experience mimics the child's internalization of information and her retrospective ordering of narrative logic. Nothing is explained to her; instead, she must

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 102.

construct and reconstruct her understanding of the world around her based on impression and experience. The calf story also suggests Müller's view of childhood as a whole: it is a tumultuous, confusing [*verworren*] process in which the child must figure out the rules of the world around her via intuition and error; she is punished for transgressing even rules she did not know existed. Throughout childhood, she learns that she must subordinate her own thoughts and feelings in order not to incur the ire of those in authority (in this particular story, often her own parents). Recalling Müller's explication of "erfundene Wahrnehmung," "Niederungen" depicts the process of ego formation in a repressive society. The girl must negotiate between her own desires on the one hand, and the familial as well as social pressures of the world around her on the other. This, of course, is something all children do, but in the context of the Banat Swabian village, the process by which she might learn to balance her inner life with the external world is disrupted. As in *Der Teufel sitzt im Spiegel*, the girl learns that she must repress her own thoughts and feelings in order to survive in this remote, ethnocentric village—a survival mechanism that gives the reader insight into how, on a larger scale, individuals come to obey and eventually consent to oppressive social structures.

The calf episode furthermore illustrates another theme that runs throughout "Niederungen"—namely, the changing economic role of the child. Scholarship on the child often addresses the concept of "innocence" from an economic perspective, arguing that late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century campaigns against child labor led to the notion that (middle class, white) children need to be "protected" from concerns about money.<sup>73</sup> This scholarship, however,

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<sup>73</sup> See e.g. Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), especially introduction and conclusion; Henry Jenkins, "Introduction: Childhood Innocence and Other Modern Myths," in *The Children's Culture Reader*, ed. Henry Jenkins (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 1–37; and Viviana A. Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), especially chapters one, two, and three.

mostly addresses urban and suburban contexts the U.S., Britain, and France. Müller's text helps address a gap in the historical and cultural coverage by allowing us to examine a similar phenomenon from the perspective of a rural childhood in the Eastern Bloc.

Although the narrator represents village society in "Niederungen" as traditional and closed, she nonetheless knows that her childhood is markedly different from that of previous generations. Before, families had large numbers of children:

Im Winter gingen sie [die Kinder] einzeln ins Dorf und abwechselnd zur Schule, weil es im Haus nicht Schuhe genug für alle Füße gab. Man konnte im Haus niemandem fehlen. Wenn der eine nicht da war, waren viele andere da.<sup>74</sup>

Families had many children in order to have more unpaid labor around the farm; whether or not they were educated was a secondary concern. Children worked to sustain the family, and—like unskilled laborers—seemed replaceable. By contrast, the narrator's childhood, for all its brutality and loneliness, seems privileged:

Heute haben sie bloß ein Kind im Haus, und das hat sieben Paar Schuhe, und was ist das schon. Das Haus ist leer, und da stehen die Schuhe, und sie sind immer blitzblank und sauber, weil das Kind nicht mehr durch den Dreck gehen darf, und wenn es regnet, wird es auf den Arm genommen und getragen.<sup>75</sup>

Her experience is marked by the kinds of protections often discussed in connection with the child. An only child, her presence or absence is unmistakable. Müller reuses the image of shoes to underscore the differences. Resources that would have been stretched in a family with many children—who all share one pair of shoes—can all be allocated to one child, resulting in an absurd seven pairs of shoes. The narrator's shoes are "blitzblank" and "sauber" because she is not allowed to step in mud, but is instead carried; they represent not only the abstract notion of the child's "purity," but also signal that she does not need to perform the kind of labor that might

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<sup>74</sup> Müller, "Niederungen," 92.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

dirty them. The very protection that elevates her from the mud her parents trudge through also estranges her from them. When a child forbidden to walk in the mud witnesses bribery and slaughter, she sees corruption, complicity, and cruelty. What her mother sees, however, is a child unable to appreciate the measures that need to be taken for survival. The protections afforded to the child leave her without a frame of reference that would enable her to understand her parents' actions, which results in misunderstanding, frustration, and violence. In showing this juxtaposition, Müller transports the reader to a point before an adult perspective had made sense of childhood experiences, before empathy for cows was replaced by a more detached understanding of the origins of meat and milk.

As we can see, Müller paints an altogether different picture of twentieth-century childhood than what is usually discussed in theoretical literature. Theory often follows the historical trajectory of the United States and, later, Western Europe. In this narrative, after the abolition of children's wage-labor, youth (particularly teenagers) increasingly became targeted as consumers, as early as the 1920s in the United States and certainly by the fifties after the postwar reconstruction years in Western Europe.<sup>76</sup> While Communist states ostensibly sought to instill an anti-capitalist ethos in their populations, in reality, East Germany also had to contend with the demand for consumer goods in order to placate its citizens.<sup>77</sup> This issue is entirely absent from

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<sup>76</sup> On children as consumers from the perspective of queer theory, see e.g. Stockton, 41-8. On the link between youth culture and consumerism in postwar Western Europe, see e.g. Kaspar Maase, "Establishing Cultural Democracy: Youth, 'Americanization,' and the Irresistible Rise of Popular Culture," in *The Miracle Years: A Cultural History of West Germany, 1949 - 1968*, ed. Hanna Schissler (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 428-50; Bill Osgerby, *Youth in Britain Since 1945* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 30-49.

<sup>77</sup> On consumer society in the GDR, see Ina Merkel, "Alternative Rationalities, Strange Dreams, Absurd Utopias: On Socialist Advertising and Market Research," in *Socialist Modern: East German Everyday Culture and Politics*, ed. Katherine Pence and Paul Betts (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 323-44; Katherine Pence, "Women on the Verge: Consumers Between Private Desires and Public Crisis," in *ibid.*, 287-322; and Judd Stitzel, "Shopping, Sewing, Networking, Complaining: Consumer Culture and the Relationships between State and Society in the GDR," in *ibid.*, 253-86.



Herta Müller's representation of childhood in Romania. Access to the kinds of media and popular culture that would have helped foster these desires (another recurrent theme in writing about children) is nearly non-existent. As "Niederungen" shows, even acquiring food from the family's own livestock is difficult; the villagers lack the excess income that would allow them to purchase new consumer goods, even if there were any to be had—which there were not.

This was a problem throughout Romania. While the liberalization period had seen an influx of consumer goods (including from the West), by the mid-1970s, Ceaușescu curtailed access to these commodities when he consolidated power.<sup>78</sup> Goods began to disappear (including gasoline, clothing, and foodstuffs), and by the early 1980s, many necessities were only available through the black market or other informal economies; access to luxury items depended entirely on status within the Communist party.<sup>79</sup> Because *Niederungen* takes place in Banat Swabia and the primary action of *Herztier* takes place during the height of Ceaușescu's power, the kind of consumption associated with Western teens never comes into play in Müller's representations of childhood. Instead, Müller reveals how the dearth of available goods—especially food—causes children to act in the only way they know how to reliably support themselves, by following the examples of their parents and the other adults around them.

### *Child's Play: Games and the Reproduction of Social Norms*

In her fiction, Müller often represents children's socialization into adult norms and their accommodation to dominant culture through games and play. Writing about children often

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<sup>78</sup> Jill Massino, "From Black Caviar to Blackouts: Gender, Consumption, and Lifestyle in Ceaușescu's Romania," in *Communism Unwrapped: Consumption in Cold War Eastern Europe*, ed. Paulina Bren and Mary Neuberger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 227-37.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 237-8.

reflects a fascination with play and games. In narrative, scenes of play can indicate a child's sense of fantasy and imagination, as well as reflect developmental processes.

Psychoanalytic theory identifies children's games as a means of working through situations children do not understand or over which they have no control. In *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* (1920), Freud famously describes observing his grandson's 'fort-da' game: the child threw away a toy, declaring it gone [*fort*], and then retrieved it, joyously proclaiming its presence [*da*].<sup>80</sup> Instead of ascribing this action to a flight of fancy, Freud understands the toy as a proxy for the boy's mother: the child displaces his anger and despair at his mother's absence onto the toy, and through the repetition of the game, works through the pain he feels when his mother leaves (and reminds himself of her return through the game's resolution). The repetition of the game blunts the pain the child feels at his mother's absence; it also allows him to take an active role in mastering the situation instead of feeling passive and helpless when she leaves.<sup>81</sup> Like the *fort-da* example, games are integral to development because they create a space for children to safely enact what they don't yet understand.

In historical and social criticism, play is often understood as an indicator of societal pressures on children and historical shifts in ideas about culture and childhood. In *Centuries of Childhood* (1960), for example, Philippe Ariès interprets the development of specialized toys for children as one of the indicators of the emergence of the modern conception of childhood in the seventeenth century; taboos about which games were "good for" children reflect adult concerns about the role of development and moral education in early childhood.<sup>82</sup> For Kathryn Bond

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<sup>80</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*, 1920, in vol. 13 of *Gesammelte Werke*, 13-7.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-5.

<sup>82</sup> See Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, trans. Robert Baldick (New York: Knopf, 1962), 71 – 92.

Stockton, play relates to her understanding that children have a knack for metaphor and figurative substitution; their use of metaphor is a means of delaying their entry into (heterosexual, reproductive) adulthood.<sup>83</sup> In Stockton's reading, this aptitude for metaphor allows children to "try out" different aspects of adulthood in a safe way long before actually assuming those responsibilities. While Stockton's interpretation opens up interesting lines of inquiry into the possibilities of play, it is important to point out that her texts come from twentieth and twenty-first century capitalist cultures; by virtue of their social and historical circumstances, the child-figures she discusses have different frameworks for understanding the nature of adulthood, and alternatives to a normative future, than do the Eastern-Bloc children under discussion here. Müller's writing offers an interesting case in point, and opportunity to build on Stockton's framework.

In "Niederungen," qualities normally associated with children's play—fantasy, imagination, creativity—are strikingly, purposefully absent. Although the protagonist is empathetic (towards the calf, for instance), she is anything but fanciful. Even the language she uses is largely descriptive and devoid of metaphor. At both the beginning and the end of the story, the narrator and another child play "mother and father."<sup>84</sup> The first game seems like an ordinary game of 'house' – children playing at, without truly understanding, domestic life. When the game is repeated at the end of the story, specific aspects of what the reader now understands to be everyday life in the village creep into the game:

Ich beschimpfe ihn, weil er betrunken ist, weil kein Geld im Haus ist, weil die Kuh kein Futter hat, ich nenne [ihn] Faulpelz und Dreckschwein und Vagabund und Säufer und Tunichtgut und Nichtsnutz und Hurenbock und Schweinehund. So geht das Spiel.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Stockton, 15 – 6, and chapter two and conclusion.

<sup>84</sup> Müller, "Niederungen," 17 – 8, 97 – 102.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

While the first game is cut short by the narrator's grandfather, the second game comes to an altogether different conclusion: "Wir spielen nicht zu Ende. Es ist Abend, Mutter and Vater übernehmen unser Spiel."<sup>86</sup> Since the beginning of the story, the narrator has begun to take on the language of the adults around her, learning to play their 'game.' Her play is a replication of the world she knows, the same world her mother, father, and grandparents know—that is, it is less a game than an instantiation of the life she is being prepared for. She enacts with her friend the troubling dynamics she witnesses at home. While the child characters analyzed by Stockton fancifully try on adulthood and imagine alternative worlds through their play, Müller's narrator doesn't imagine alternatives; she only reenacts. The protagonist furthermore refuses to distinguish what she does from the domestic labor her mother performs: "Weshalb nennt man alles, was Mütter tun, Arbeiten und alles, was Kinder tun, Spielen."<sup>87</sup> While her 'play' works through what she witnesses all around her, is not a means of delaying adulthood, because it is comprised of the same actions undertaken by the adults around her, day in and day out.

Games are also used to establish adult dynamics in another story from the *Niederungen* collection, "Dorfchronik." In the story, schoolchildren play a game called "Völkerball:" "Bei diesem Spiel teilen sich die Schüler in Völker ein. Wen der Ball getroffen hat, der muss hinter die Schusslinie zurücktreten und, weil er tot ist, zusehen, bis alle anderen aus seinem Volk erschossen sind, was im Dorf gefallen genannt wird."<sup>88</sup> Here, the game is clearly influenced by the children's fathers' experience of war. Those hit by the ball are deemed fatally shot ("erschossen"), and have "fallen," the language used to describe a soldier's death in battle. The

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>88</sup> Müller, "Dorfchronik," in *Niederungen*, 125.

gym teacher finds it difficult to assign students to a “Volk” (the choices being German or Russian), because it inevitably provokes tensions based on ethnic loyalties:

Es kommt vor, dass es dem Lehrer nicht gelingt, die nötige Schüleranzahl zu überzeugen, Russen zu sein. Wenn der Lehrer nicht mehr weiterweiß, sagt er, seid eben alle Deutsche und los. Weil die Schüler in diesem Fall jedoch nicht begreifen, weshalb man da noch kämpfen sollte, teilen sie sich in Sachsen und in Schwaben ein.<sup>89</sup>

The children, who have had no personal experience of the Second World War and the conflicts between Germans and Russians, nonetheless feel personal attachments to the idea of being German, and resist being assigned to the “Russian” team, even for the duration of a game. But even declaring all the students German does not fix the problem, as the children are too caught up in the conceit of ethnic conflict rather than recognizing that it is merely a pretext for physical education. The game breaks down until they decide to divide into Saxons and Swabians. These inherited conflicts both hinder and fuel even a simple children’s game.

No effort is made to disabuse the children of these received ideas. On the contrary, because of the school’s small size, their gym teacher is also their German and history teacher, and he finds Völkerball “auch für den Geschichtsunterricht geeignet.”<sup>90</sup> Rather than assist them in emotionally working through what they do not understand, the game reinforces the prejudices and divides that characterizes their parents’ generation. Whereas in “Niederungen,” the narrator chooses to play ‘mother and father,’ indicating that the game has personal meaning for her, in “Dorfchronik,” the children are directed by their teacher to play “Völkerball.” The lack of choice would suggest that the children are simply following instructions and replicating what they do not understand without much thought. This game naturalizes the socio-cultural prejudices of adults (such as the animosity ethnic Germans felt towards the Soviet Union following the Second

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

World War and their experiences in Siberian labor camps), entrenching these dynamics further into the culture of the village and perpetuating them into the next generation.

Adults encourage and reward this behavior. The schoolchildren in “Dorfchronik” learn songs about “Wandern und Jagen,” and poetry about “Liebe zur Mutter und zum Vaterland.”<sup>91</sup> In her own life, Müller witnessed the lasting emotional resonance of Nazi war songs on the ex-SS soldiers she knew in the village. These songs “hatten dieselbe Funktion: Beschwörung des Krieges als Jugendzeit. Entkleidet von allen politischen Inhalten werden Lieder bemüht und dienen. Auch wenn im Verstand die Distanzierung eingetreten ist, verklären sie das Gefühl und machen Menschen weiterhin zutraulich.”<sup>92</sup> The men sang these songs at village gatherings because they conjured a sense of nostalgia, regardless of their political content. By teaching the children patriotic songs in “Dorfchronik,” the teacher aims for a similar outcome: adult citizens who will feel similar affective ties to ideas about their Germanness without having thought critically about what that means.

However, this fostering of insular ethnocentrism is not unique to the village. For Müller, the village reveals in microcosm what a dictatorship enacts on a macro scale. In *Der Teufel sitzt im Spiegel*, Müller writes that she felt constantly surveilled by her German neighbors, which in turn prepared her for life under a totalitarian state: “Im gewissen Sinn war das, was ich später als ‘totalitär’ und als ‘Staat’ bezeichnete, die Ausdehnung dessen, was ein abgelegenes, überschaubares Dorf ist.”<sup>93</sup> As a child, Müller feels an extreme pressure to conform, and is terrified that others might discover her true thoughts and feelings. The totalitarian state is a logical, larger-scale extension of this culture, which she had already learned to accommodate in

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Müller, 20.

childhood. Although the totalitarianism of the Romanian state was based around different loyalties and animosities, the structures it used to enforce its dominance were recognizable to Müller from her childhood.

Müller's desire to conform as a child stemmed not from the kind of patriotism described in "Dorfchronik," or any particular love for the community. Instead, she felt she had no alternative: "ich wollte dazugehören. Wohin denn sonst. Weil das wichtig war, war ich mir zum eignen Ungeheuer geworden."<sup>94</sup> Given the choice between alienation from society or alienation from herself, Müller chooses to become her own "Ungeheuer" rather than not fit in:

Durch die Täuschung ist es mir damals gelungen, dazuzugehören zu ihnen und ihrem wunschlosen Leben. Ja, es war Untertanendenken mit allen, diesem Denken eigenen, berechnenden Tricks. Es war der oft nahtlose Übergang vom Buckeln zum Herrschen über den Augenblick. Ein Spiel mit der Ahnung und Ahnungslosigkeit der anderen. [...]  
Es war auch ein Gefühl dabei, mir etwas erschlichen zu haben, was ich nicht verdiente.<sup>95</sup>

This passage could easily describe life under a dictatorship as well. Totalitarian societies function not only through surveillance and overt violence, but also because they prompt citizens to self-police and self-censor. Like Müller's experience in the village, citizens will conform in order not to provoke the ire of the state or be branded as outsiders.

Interestingly, the language of "games" reappears in this passage. Much like the games in "Niederungen" and "Dorfchronik," the game is not something fanciful or creative. Instead, it is a survival mechanism, a rehearsal for the kind of emotional and social maneuverings she will need to survive in a dictatorship. Although concealing the truth of her inner life does indeed win the young Müller acceptance and even love (conditional though it may be), her success is permeated with guilt, because she earns it through the manipulation of others.

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<sup>94</sup> Müller, *Teufel*, 13.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

Significantly, although she has little power in relation to the rest of society, the child is not powerless or without agency. Rather, she exemplifies a broader kind of “Untertanendenken:” the child—like those in subaltern positions—carefully studies those with power in order to fit in, and uses that knowledge for self-protection. At the same time, the love she wins feels undeserved, because she uses her knowledge of others to please them and win their love (as opposed to spontaneously and authentically acting that way). These actions stand in stark contrast to the choices Müller makes later in life—namely, refusing to collaborate with the Securitate. The difference, explored more fully in *Herztier*, is the existence of an alternative community to which she can belong (other Banat Swabian dissident/avant-garde artists). Even this survival, however, comes at a great personal and emotional cost.

### **“Socialism in One Family:” Natalism, the State, the Nuclear Family**

In both *Niederungen* and *Herztier*, the first site of “Untertanendenken” is the institution the child has first and most frequent contact with—the nuclear family. Throughout her oeuvre, Müller thematizes the dysfunctional, destructive patterns within the family. “Niederungen” makes frequent references to the protagonist’s parents’ unhappiness, loneliness, and abusiveness towards one another and their child. Nonetheless, they, like the rest of the village, cling to the structure of the nuclear family. The narrator relates how one night, her drunken father, “ein todtrauriges Tier,” falls onto the table, insisting, “verdammst noch mal, wir sind eine glückliche Familie, [...] das Glück beißt uns die Köpfe ab, verdammst noch mal, das Glück frisst uns das Leben.”<sup>96</sup> His repeated insistence that, despite all evidence to the contrary, that they are a happy family becomes tragic and, for the narrator, frightening. The scene, too, provides a rare instance

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<sup>96</sup> Müller, “Niederungen,” 93.



of figurative language, comparing the father to an animal, carrying the metaphor through to the image of happiness biting off their heads and eating their lives (using “fressen,” the verb used to describe animals eating rather than the more generic, human-appropriate “essen”). The image recalls the numerous scenes of violence done to animals—especially young offspring—suggesting that the family, too, has no future. Not only do animals die, but the natural world around the village appears sick. Fruit trees—obvious symbols of fertility and procreation—are blighted by a fungus; frogs die off in huge numbers, their stench permeating the air.<sup>97</sup>

The narrator of *Herztier* shares many biographical details with the narrator of “Niederungen;” scenes from her childhood, narrated in the third person (and often in the present tense), are interspersed with the main story of her friendship with other German-Romanian dissidents and persecution by the Securitate. These scenes continue *Niederungen*’s depictions of corrosive family dynamics, often drawing similar episodes. Exploring the father character’s brutality in greater detail (the third-person narrative, mimicking a child’s voice, calls his war crimes “Friedhöfe machen”), the narrator writes, “[d]aß er, der Friedhöfe gemacht hat, dem Kind den Tod wünscht.”<sup>98</sup> Her mother’s love is expressed through pain, repeatedly tying the child to a chair: “Die Mutter liebt das Kind. Sie liebt es wie eine Sucht und kann sich nicht halten, weil ihr Verstand genauso an die Liebe angebunden ist, wie das Kind an den Stuhl.”<sup>99</sup> As an adult at university, the narrator and her friends compare notes and find that their families share the same dynamics. Their mothers attempt to tie their children to them in a more figurative way by writing

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<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 24, 100. The latter is the image Müller refers to in her explanation of “erfundene Wahrheit” in *Der Teufel sitzt im Spiegel*.

<sup>98</sup> Herta Müller, *Herztier*, (1994; Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2007), 22.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

to them about their various bodily ailments, viewing these as “eine Schlinge für die Kinder. Sie bleiben in der Ferne angebunden.”<sup>100</sup>

Although the childhood scenes in the novel have much in common with *Niederungen*, *Herztier* shows a markedly different narrative structure and style than the earlier stories. *Herztier* is more orderly and stylistically consistent, with scenes from the narrator’s adulthood narrated largely in the past tense and episodes from childhood usually in the present tense. Though there are flash-forwards, the bulk of the main narration generally follows a chronological order. These differences reflect a shift in narrative and thematic focus from Müller’s earlier work. The stories in *Niederungen* (particularly the title story) are interested how children perceive the world, and how the experience of a repressive society becomes entangled with their psychological and social development. Therefore, on the stylistic level, they evoke the child’s experience, in which the logic of the world must be reconstructed from impressionistic, discontinuous episodes. *Herztier*, by contrast, focuses on the adult experience of authoritarianism. Though the narrator’s understanding of the world, as well as the scope of social and political possibility, are inflected by her early experiences, the childhood flashbacks inform and complement the main narrative rather than comprising the bulk of the plot. However, *Herztier* nonetheless adds to a reading of Müller’s use of the child: the novel expands on the earlier representations of childhood in Banat Swabia by adding a broader picture of Romania in the 1970s and 1980s, including the effects of the state’s limitations on reproductive rights.

Müller’s depictions of the nuclear family in *Herztier* must be understood not only as a reflection of life in the Banat Swabian region, but in the context of Nicolae Ceaușescu’s aggressive pro-natalist politics. Concerned about the declining birthrate in Romania, Ceaușescu

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 54.

issued the draconian Decree 770 in 1966, making abortion and contraception illegal except for women over 45 (later lowered to 40); women who already had four children (later raised to five); or in cases of rape, incest, or life-threatening complications.<sup>101</sup> The Decree was enforced by the Securitate, who monitored doctors and hospitals. Mortality rates for pregnant women rose sharply; one estimate puts the mortality rate for women during the period from 1965 to 1989 at 9,452; by 1989, Romania had the highest maternal death rate in Europe.<sup>102</sup> The state's object was to both increase its available labor force and to create a new generation loyal to and dependent upon the socialist state. Gail Kligman writes that

Despite lip service about the virtues of the family, the preeminence of the state was never left in doubt. Ultimately, it fell to the state to socialize families into new 'socialist families.' [...] The social emotional solidarities and material practices embedded within its everyday functioning were anathema to the architects of socialism. These were to be replaced by loyalty to the 'family of the nation' and selfless labor on behalf of the paternalist state.<sup>103</sup>

Ceaușescu also drew heavily on kinship metaphors, describing himself as the "father" of the state and his wife as its "mother;" socialism in Romania was known as "socialism in one family."<sup>104</sup>

Müller has written and spoken of the cruelty of these laws and the damage the Romanian state wrought on interpersonal relationships. For all the pro-child rhetoric, the children born of these policies did not benefit from them, nor did their families: "Es waren Kinder, die sich weder die Mutter noch der Vater gewünscht hatten. Die nichts weiter waren als das kleinere Übel—die Alternative zu Knast oder Tod."<sup>105</sup> That they are unwanted is no secret to the children; they are

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<sup>101</sup> See Gail Kligman, *The Politics of Duplicity: Controlling Reproduction in Ceaușescu's Romania* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), especially 28-31 and 53-61. See also Massino, 228-35.

<sup>102</sup> Kligman, 214; Massino, 235.

<sup>103</sup> Kligman, 28.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>105</sup> Herta Müller, "Hunger und Seide. Männer und Frauen im Alltag," in *Hunger und Seide. Essays*. (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1995), 85.

instead the ‘lesser evil,’ calculated to be a better alternative to jail or death. Although Müller herself was not a so-called ‘child of the Decree’ (nor are her literary analogs in “Niederungen” and *Herztier*), the unwanted children she describes will likely have similar experiences to her protagonists. “Ich habe Angst,” she writes in the essay, “Hunger und Seide,” “wenn ich daran denke, daß viele Kinder eines Tages erfahren werden, weshalb es sie gibt. [...] Das dritte, vierte, fünfte Kind einer Mutter wird den Zusammenhang zwischen dem Zwang einer Frau, zu gebären, und seinem eigenen Leben nicht übersehen können.”<sup>106</sup> She knows that these children will have no illusions about the reasons for their existence; the Decree creates misery for both women who must carry unwanted pregnancies and the children who will suffer emotionally as a result.

The secondary characters in *Herztier* paint a picture of the ramifications of Romanian reproductive policies, the ways women seek (and sometimes fail) to cope with them, and the consequences for children. A friend of the narrator’s, a tailor, flees the country, abandoning her children in Romania; after she leaves, the narrator visits the children, who do not yet understand that their mother does not plan to return.<sup>107</sup> Seeing a woman with a high-risk pregnancy, the narrator wonders if the woman will die in childbirth.<sup>108</sup> And a neighbor, who herself had grown up in an orphanage, resents her own children: “Geht hinunter in den Sand, sagte die Frau, geht spielen. Es klang wie: Geht unter im Sand, kommt nie wieder.”<sup>109</sup> When the narrator is asked if she wants children, she immediately answers no.<sup>110</sup> The narrator’s encounter with these other women and children are fleeting; the reader is not told what happens to them, but can extrapolate

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Müller, *Herztier*, 219.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 204.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 156.

from the novel that they will likely face hardship without help. Müller is less interested here in exploring the specific fates of these characters or the psychic processes of development (as in *Niederungen*) so much as she is in showing the far-reaching consequences of the Romanian dictatorship and its policies.

The extreme limitations on reproductive rights destroy not only familial relationships, but adults' ability to trust one another. Müller describes an encounter with a colleague who, faced with an unwanted pregnancy, turns to Müller for the name of a doctor who can provide an abortion, knowing that Müller has no children. At first, Müller believes that the woman intends to provoke her into confessing something illegal and refuses to answer; finally, seeing the woman's desperation, she tells her that she takes the pill and has self-induced two abortions.<sup>111</sup> Some months later, when she encounters the woman again and finds her not pregnant, Müller tells the woman she is glad she was able to 'solve her problem.' The woman curtly replies that she does not know what Müller means.<sup>112</sup> Even the fragile trust the women had forged cannot last, so strong is the fear of punishment for terminating a pregnancy. Not only can they not trust each other, but they cannot trust the professionals tasked with protecting women's health. Müller goes on to describe why she emphasized to the other woman that she had induced the abortions herself. In women's clinics, some of the "doctors" were actually secret police there to interrogate women who sought help for complications related to abortions—they are "Verhörspezialisten."<sup>113</sup> Only after obtaining information about the abortion could real doctors

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<sup>111</sup> Müller, "Hunger und Seide," 78-9.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

treat the patients; women often died while under interrogation from this withholding of treatment.<sup>114</sup>

Children learn as early as kindergarten that Ceaușescu is “der Vater aller Kinder.”<sup>115</sup> Ceaușescu becomes absorbed into children’s consciousness as a paternal figure from a young age. Like the patriotic songs described in “Dorfchronik,” this repetition serves “um das eigene Denken zu lähmen, bevor es noch vorhanden war. Und das Erscheckendste an diesem Satz war, daß er für viele Kinder auf eine macabre Weise zutraf.”<sup>116</sup> Many of the children do not know their actual parents because, unwanted, they have been consigned to orphanages. For these children, the dictator and his wife are the closest thing they will know to father and mother figures—socialism in one family.

Though the state desires children, Müller’s writing emphasizes that it cannot, or will not, take care of them once they are born. Rumors abound that Ceaușescu uses the blood of children to cure his own ailments: “Das Kinderblut gegen Blutkrebs bekommt er im Land. In den Geburtenkliniken wird es den Neugeborenen mit japanischen Saugnadeln aus der Stirn gepumpt.”<sup>117</sup> The rumors are clearly outlandish (although a number of people believe them anyway), but they say much about the perception of Ceaușescu at that time. Echoing the story of the Transylvanian vampire, Count Dracula, the text posits that these policies benefit neither women nor children, but the dictator himself, whose hypocrisy extends to using Western surgical materials (an implicit repudiation of socialism, government policy, and Eastern Bloc products) in order to murderously extend his own life.

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Müller, *Herztier*, 70. Cf. Müller, “Hunger und Seide,” 78.

In reality, many children ended up in overfull orphanages. Müller reports that after the fall of Communism in Romania, it came to light that children were “sold” to Western countries, or recruited to the secret police.<sup>118</sup> Romania also faced severe economic hardship beginning in the 1970s, which was worsened in the 1980s by Ceaușescu’s decision to prioritize repaying foreign debt (rather than the production of food or goods for domestic consumption).<sup>119</sup> A rationing program—justified as “scientific nourishment”—was instituted in 1981.<sup>120</sup> Starvation became so extreme in the 1980s that people sought out blood transfusions for nutrition.<sup>121</sup>

This phenomenon is echoed not only in *Herztier*’s depiction of the vampiric dictator, but in its description of Romanian children. One character, Kurt, works as an engineer in a slaughterhouse, where workers drink the blood of the animals they slaughter. He observes the men’s children, who have no interest in school. Instead, they want to be like their fathers. Kurt tells the narrator, “Diese Kinder sind schon Komplizen. Die riechen, wenn sie abends geküßt werden, daß ihre Väter im Schlachthaus Blut saufen und wollen dorthin.”<sup>122</sup> The children want to follow in their fathers’ footsteps because their work literally provides one of their only sources of sustenance. The image also picks up on “Niederungen”’s fascination with the interplay between sustenance and violence, survival and brutality. These children have already been socialized into accepting the violence that comes with slaughterhouse work—at school, instead of reading books, they draw images of cow and pig hearts on the walls.<sup>123</sup> Unlike the narrator of “Niederungen,” who feels revolted upon realizing the origin of milk, these children are eager to

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<sup>118</sup> Müller, “Hunger und Seide,” 81.

<sup>119</sup> Massino, 237.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

<sup>121</sup> Brigid Haines, ““Die akute Einsamkeit des Menschen,”” 95.

<sup>122</sup> Müller, *Herztier*, 101.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

participate in the slaughter so that they too can have access to blood, and therefore nourishment. These children identify not with the animals but with the people who have relative power, namely the slaughterers.

Significantly, the novel ends with another image of a child. After Kurt kills himself, the narrator and her only surviving friend, Edgar, sort through his photos. Among Kurt's things, they find a photo of a Securitate agent, Hauptmann Pjele, who has overseen their interrogations and terrorized them throughout the book. The photo shows Pjele carrying a package in one arm and holding hands with a child. Kurt has written on the photo, "Der Großvater kauft Kuchen."<sup>124</sup> Looking at the photo, in which the Securitate man appears harmless and kindly, the narrator wishes that his crimes would become legible to those around him, particularly his grandchild:

Ich wünschte mir, daß der Hauptmann Pjele einen Sack mit allen seinen Toten trägt. [...] Daß das Verbrechen stinkt, wenn er sich nach der Arbeit zu seinem Enkel an den Tisch setzt. Daß dieses Kind sich vor den Fingern ekelt, die ihm den Kuchen geben.<sup>125</sup>

Given the dearth of consumer goods and foodstuffs available in Romania at that time,<sup>126</sup> the choice of cake (as opposed to, say, bread or milk) suggests that Pjele's work gives his family a degree of luxury not enjoyed by most of their fellow countrymen—his grandchild does not need to aspire to slaughterhouse work for access to blood like the other children in *Herztier*. Pjele's grandchild, of course, has no inkling of the source of the grandfather's good fortune. The narrator wants not only for Pjele's crimes to be legible, but to have physical, sensory traces so revolting that they upset the structure of the nuclear family. In her vengeful fantasy, the child sees the grandfather as a man who engages in torture and drives dissidents to their deaths—or rather, smells the stink of his crimes, and understands that these crimes are what enables Pjele to

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 252.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> See e.g. Massino, 238-41.



bring him cake. In other words, she wants the grandchild to realize that violence and crimes against humanity are the source of this sustenance and pleasure, and to reject the grandfather's tainted gifts. The narrator's fantasy lasts only a moment; she remembers Kurt's own words: "diese Kinder sind schon Komplizen," and his description of the children who longed to become slaughterhouse workers.<sup>127</sup> In recalling his words, she implicitly acknowledges that her fantasy of the child disrupting and rejecting the corrupt social structure that sustains it to be unrealistic. Pjele's grandchild, the text suggests, has already been coopted into supporting the system that his grandfather works to uphold.

## Conclusion

Because her life and work are so concerned with repressive social and political systems, as well as the difficulty and necessity of dissent, it is fitting that Müller would turn to the site of introduction to these systems—childhood. Her prose, and especially her fiction, explore how the child becomes coopted into identifying with oppressors and the prejudices and preconceptions that come with the dominant culture. Yet her depictions of these children are not unsympathetic; instead, the point Müller repeatedly returns to is that, for children with no other alternative, accepting violence and oppression is a means of survival. Children come to understand and accept that the very food they eat and the milk they drink are bound up in actions that naturally disgust and horrify them. The dissidents depicted in *Herztier* only come to realize this by virtue of being adults, and outsiders—and not all of them survive their efforts to resist totalitarianism.

Interestingly, Müller has taken this understanding of childhood as a site of acclimatization and, at times, used that to her advantage. In *Der Teufel sitzt im Spiegel*, she uses

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<sup>127</sup> Müller, *Herztier*, 252.

the reader's assumptions about children (that they confuse fantasy with reality; that they believe ridiculous things) and uses it to prepare her readers for her explanation of "erfundene Wahrnehmung." While still respecting the confusing, emotional turbulence children experience, she reverses the dynamics used on the child. Instead of adults impressing values upon the child, she uses the child as a literary device to teach her (presumably adult) audience that the boundaries between fact and imagination are indeed permeable, and that the processes of socialization and indoctrination do not end in childhood but continue on, creating a population that both self-polices and perpetuates these dynamics to the next generation. If childhood is the first site of socialization, for Müller, its representation can also become a productive means of illustrating the very social systems that, in childhood, became invisible and normalized.

### Chapter Three:

#### **Childlike: Adults and the Construction of Childhood in Jenny Erpenbeck's *Geschichte vom alten Kind* and *Wörterbuch***

Asked in an interview about why she chose to write from the perspective of children in *Geschichte vom alten Kind* (1999) and *Wörterbuch* (2005), Jenny Erpenbeck corrected her interlocutor's characterization of her books, saying, "Actually, both characters are not children and are not young girls. They are adults looking back or trying to invent a childhood. [...] I always think it's a little bit misunderstood because, of course, they do seem to be girls but they are not girls."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, this distinction lies at the heart of these novels: both feature protagonists who, for most of the book, appear to be children, but are in fact adults. Erpenbeck's first book, *Geschichte vom alten Kind*, follows an awkward, unnamed orphan—the eponymous 'old child'—who claims to be fourteen years old, but turns out to be a thirty-something-year-old woman. The likewise nameless protagonist of *Wörterbuch* narrates the story of her youth in a style that is deceptively childlike; in the end, she too is revealed to be a young woman working through an early-childhood trauma.

Yet as Erpenbeck herself notes, much of the response to these works glosses over the distinction between child characters, and characters who pretend to be children. Not only do these women act as if they are children, but their performances are heavily based on long-standing tropes of childhood innocence. The growing body of scholarship on Erpenbeck acknowledges the deception at the heart of both books, rightfully linking these plot twists to

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<sup>1</sup> Jenny Erpenbeck, interview by Mieke Chew, "The Jenny Erpenbeck Interview," *The Quarterly Conversation*, no. 30, Winter 2012, <http://quarterlyconversation.com/the-jenny-erpenbeck-interview>.

larger themes of deception and truth that run throughout her oeuvre.<sup>2</sup> However, comparatively little attention has been paid to Erpenbeck's depiction of the adult investment in the idealization of childhood. The critique of adult fantasies surrounding the innocence of children is central to both these early works; adult projections of childhood, and the frustration those adults encounter when confronted with actual children, deserve closer examination. The significance of their acts of deception are heightened by the political context of both stories, one written in the aftermath of the dissolution of East Germany, and the other imagining the collapse of a fictional Latin American dictatorship. In both cases, the protagonists are reaching backward: one for an idealized childhood and a society that is comprehensible to her, and the other to the origins of her trauma.

### **“[U]nser Alltag war plötzlich kein Alltag mehr, sondern ein Museum:”<sup>3</sup> Reimagining Childhood After the *Wende***

Born in 1967, Jenny Erpenbeck grew up in the German Democratic Republic, the child of what has been described as a kind of East German “*Schriftstellerdynastie*,” her grandparents, Hedda Zinner and Fritz Erpenbeck, were writers, as is her father, John Erpenbeck.<sup>4</sup> Jenny Erpenbeck did not begin writing or publishing fiction until well after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Because of the *Mauerfall* and the subsequent dissolution of the German Democratic Republic while she was still a student, Erpenbeck never had a chance to experience adulthood as

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<sup>2</sup> See Friedhelm Marx and Julia Schöll, “Wahrheit und Täuschung. Eine Einleitung,” in Marx and Schöll, *Wahrheit und Täuschung. Beiträge zum Werke Jenny Erpenbecks* (Göttingen: Wallenstein, 2014), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Jenny Erpenbeck, “Über das Erzählen und das Verschweigen. Bamberger Poetik-Vorlesung,” in Marx and Schöll, *Wahrheit und Täuschung*, 24. Hereafter cited as “Bamberger Poetik-Vorlesung.”

<sup>4</sup> Nancy Nobile, “‘So morgen wie heut:’ Time and Context in Jenny Erpenbeck’s *Geschichte vom alten Kind*,” *Gegenwartsliteratur* 2 (2003): 283.

a writer working in the Eastern Bloc, making her experience markedly different from someone like Christa Wolf, whose professional and creative life was in constant dialogue with the Socialist state. Not yet a part of the literary establishment in the early 1990s, Erpenbeck did not take part in the so-called *deutsch-deutsche[r] Literaturstreit* unleashed by the publication of Wolf's *Was bleibt* in 1990.<sup>5</sup> Her first book—*Geschichte vom alten Kind*—would not appear until 1999.

Though the GDR and its abrupt collapse are recurring subjects in both her fiction and nonfiction, Erpenbeck's work is interpellated as belonging to the literature of reunified Germany. This bears pointing out not to criticize the periodization, but because it has affected her work's reception. For instance, even though parallels could arguably be drawn with Wolf, no one speculates about whether or to what degree Erpenbeck's childhood and adolescence under an authoritarian state implicates her in its crimes in the manner that the experiences of Christa Wolf or Günter Grass have been debated. When it is discussed (particularly in connection to *Wörterbuch*), complicity is debated in terms of the text that raises it rather than the author's biography. This is not to suggest that criticism *should* have gone in that direction—on the contrary, it likely would not have contributed much to an understanding of her work—but to point out the radically different reception of works about growing up under authoritarianism in the late 1990s and early 2000s, even as contemporary criticism of Wolf's work would continue to debate the merits or failures of that author's brand of dissidence.

When Erpenbeck talks and writes about the *Wende*, she often emphasizes the suddenness of the GDR's dissolution, her skepticism about the version of "freedom" that came with Western

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<sup>5</sup> On the *Literaturstreit*, see Thomas Anz, "Es geht nicht um Christa Wolf." *Der Literaturstreit im vereinten Deutschland* (Munich: spangenberg, 1991); and Andreas Huyssen, "After the Wall: The Failure of German Intellectuals," in "German Reunification," ed. by Stephen Brockmann and Anson Rabinbach, special issue, *New German Critique*, no. 52 (1991): 122–43.

liberal democracy, and the complete loss of what was once the mundanity of everyday life.

Erpenbeck's descriptions of life in the GDR reflect her youthful understanding of it as an isolated place, in which any ties to the outside world were elective: "das Einzige, was uns mit dieser großen, weiten Welt da draußen verband: die internationale Solidarität."<sup>6</sup> The fall of the Berlin Wall, however, changed all that:

Es riss uns in diese große, weite Welt hinein, so schnell, dass zum Denken keine Zeit mehr blieb, riss es uns vorwärts oder rückwärts? Rückwärts, war mein Gefühl. [...] Plötzlich wurden wir, die wir bis dahin mit uns allein gewesen waren, im Weltmaßstab beurteilt. Und die Welt war plötzlich dort, wo die Wirtschaft besser funktioniert. [...] unser Alltag war plötzlich kein Alltag mehr, sondern ein Museum, oder ein Abenteuer, das man erzählt, unsere Sitten eine Attraktion. Das Selbstverständliche hörte innerhalb weniger Wochen auf, das Selbstverständliche zu sein.<sup>7</sup>

This feeling that developments popularly hailed as "progress" actually involve a move backwards permeates both *Geschichte* and *Wörterbuch*. One could read her description of the *Wende* as inflected by *Ostalgie*, the term coined specifically for nostalgia associated with East Germany. Here, Erpenbeck positions the GDR as an isolated ("bis dahin mit uns allein"), and by implication, less complicated place. Ties to the outside world are heroic acts of solidarity rather than a negotiation of Cold War politics. The fall of the Iron Curtain violently drags East Germany into the scrutiny of the rest of the world ("[e]s riss uns in diese große, weite Welt hinein;" "im Weltmaßstab beurteilt"), to be judged solely according to the value of its economic production, or lack thereof.

Yet dismissing Erpenbeck as "ostalgic" grossly oversimplifies her work. Firstly, at a certain point, the charge of *Ostalgie* ceases to be productive. *Ostalgie* is most often associated with kitsch, cheap material culture, and the commodification of the Socialist past for (Western)

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<sup>6</sup> Erpenbeck, "Bamberger Poetik-Vorlesung," 22-3.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

consumption.<sup>8</sup> The term also describes East Germans' reaction to "the West German refusal to acknowledge and respect the different *habitus* and the 'cultural heritage' and memory of the East Germans;" on a broader scale, this embrace of a specific, local past has further been understood as a reaction to globalization.<sup>9</sup> Certainly, the pitfalls of nostalgia as a cultural practice have been well documented and do not require rehashing here.<sup>10</sup> But, as several scholars have pointed out, post-Socialist literature often uses a discussion of the past in order to critique the present.<sup>11</sup> Georgina Paul argues that the "trends in post-1990 East German literature suggests not so much a passive nostalgic longing or *Ostalgie* for former (idealized) securities under a rigidly organized state system as a more active critique of features of life in 'liquid modernity.'"<sup>12</sup> Accusations of *Ostalgie*, in other words, can function as dismissals of critiques of post-reunification German society and worldwide trends towards globalization. This is not a defense of nostalgia. But the tropes of *Ostalgie* have been and continue to be explored; problematic as they may at times be, it is productive to examine what they are being used for, and why.

When it comes to Erpenbeck, it is furthermore important to point out that she is aware that her view of the GDR seems naïve. "Unmündig, jaja," she says when she talks about international-politics-as-solidarity. Of course she does not have an accurate picture of East Germany's relationship to the West (or the rest of the Eastern Bloc, for that matter): she experienced the GDR as a child and teenager. Her primary experience of East Germany was on

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<sup>8</sup> See e.g. Anthony Enns, "The Politics of *Ostalgie*: Post-Socialist Nostalgia in Recent German Film," *Screen* 48, no. 4 (Winter 2007): 475–7; and Wolfgang Emmerich, "Cultural Memory East vs. West: Is What Belongs Together Really Growing Together?," *Oxford German Studies* 38, no. 3 (2009): 251–2.

<sup>9</sup> Emmerich, 251, 252.

<sup>10</sup> For a comprehensive overview and analysis of nostalgia, especially in its post-1989 iterations, see Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

<sup>11</sup> Georgina Paul, "The Privatization of Community: Collectivism in the Post-Socialist Literature of Eastern Germany," *Oxford German Studies* 38, no. 3 (2009): 288–95.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 295.

the level of the everyday. Children experience the world on a different scale than adults do, concerned largely with their immediate environments rather than the macro scale of world politics. This apparently “simple” view of the world is what the protagonists of *Geschichte vom alten Kind* and *Wörterbuch* are reaching for when they try to reenter childhood; both, however, are confronted by the fact that, while children may lack a nuanced, analytical understanding of world politics, that does not make children’s lives less complicated (and in some cases, their lack of political and historical sensibilities actually creates problems).

When she preempts criticism of her descriptions as “unmündig,” Erpenbeck draws on a common post-*Wende* trope of describing the GDR not as an equal partner in reunification, but as an immature state that needed to rise to the level of its Western counterpart.<sup>13</sup> Yet her own *Unmündigkeit* was literally a function of her being a minor, *unmündig*, for most of her life in the GDR: “das Kindsein hieß auch, dass es keine Pornographie gab, dafür nackte Naive, die sich auf der Wiese am Weinbergspark sonnten. [...] Idylle. Unschuld. Unzucht. Inzucht.”<sup>14</sup> Her image has a prelapsarian feel, associating the *Freikörperkultur* of the GDR with the guileless nudity of Adam and Eve before the Fall.<sup>15</sup> In contrast to the image of the sheltered East German citizens, she invokes the popularized post-*Wende* image of GDR citizens crossing into the West for pornography.<sup>16</sup> Erpenbeck’s position, then, is an uncomfortable one: having experienced the GDR primarily as a child means that her lived experience dovetails with some of the more pernicious stereotypes held by West Germans or otherwise depicted as *Ostalgie*. At the same

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<sup>13</sup> See Debbie Pinfold, “‘Das Mündel will Vormund sein’: The GDR State as Child,” *German Life and Letters* 64, no. 2 (2011): 283-304.

<sup>14</sup> Erpenbeck, “Bamberger Poetik-Vorlesung,” 23.

<sup>15</sup> On FKK in the GDR, see Josie McLellan, *Love in the Time of Communism: Intimacy and Sexuality in the GDR* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), chapter six.

<sup>16</sup> Dagmar Herzog, *Sex After Fascism: Memory and Morality in Twentieth-Century Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 216.



time, her rendition of the GDR is not a purely naïve one, but a parody of post-*Wende* representational tropes. The combination of her childhood memories with these stereotypes suggests that her memories have become entangled with and overdetermined by the narratives surrounding the reunification of Germany.

### **Transition States: Political Collapse and the Return to Childhood**

Given the significant role the *Wende* played in Erpenbeck's life, and how decisively it severed her childhood and adolescence from her nascent adulthood, it is unsurprising that the rift between childhood and adulthood would comprise such a central subject in her early fiction. Both *Geschichte vom alten Kind* and *Wörterbuch* seek to parse childhood experience and loss: how children experience authoritarian societies; how memory can be tainted by outside narratives; and the gaps between the idea of childhood and the lived reality of children. In both texts, protagonists try through different means to reenter an idealized childhood by erasing both their adulthood and traumatic memories from their actual childhoods.

Written in 1993-1994, *Geschichte vom alten Kind* follows a female protagonist known only as "das Mädchen" (to whom the narrator assigns the neuter pronoun "es"). Large and grotesque, she appears on the street one night holding an empty metal bucket [*Blecheimer*], unable to recall anything but her age (fourteen). The girl is brought to a *Kinderheim*, where her only desire is to find shelter on the lowest rung of the social hierarchy. She unsettles the adults who work in the *Heim* and alienates the other children. An outsider for most of the book, she eventually finds a tacit acceptance among the other children when she proves useful to them: they discover she is willing to hold stolen goods for them and listen to their secrets, never divulging any of it to another soul. At the end of the book, the girl falls ill and, is put on a diet in

the hospital; when she loses weight, it becomes apparent that she is not a girl at all, but a thirty-year-old woman.

Although the historical time and place are never mentioned, references to the anniversary of the 13 February firebombing imply the *Kinderheim* is near Dresden; other allusions (to ‘collective’ values, Brecht, and what sounds like a DEFA-like film) suggest the story takes place prior to the *Wende*. *Geschichte vom alten Kind* easily lends itself to an allegorical reading, in which the girl’s actions represent (or parody) a longing to return to the familiar, if rigidly hierarchical, social structures of the GDR. Indeed, the ways various elements of the text’s language and plot map onto an allegorical reading of the GDR have already been thoroughly explored elsewhere.<sup>17</sup> But, as Nancy Nobile has written, “if all we notice are the novella’s GDR allusions, we—like the girl—remain mentally stuck there.”<sup>18</sup>

To read *Geschichte vom alten Kind* purely in terms of whether or not it plays into the conventions of *Ostalgie* is to miss how richly the book engages with the ways adults actively construct childhood and children’s innocence. The woman-turned-girl protagonist reflects what Katherine Bond Stockton describes as “the problem of the child as a general idea. The child is precisely who we are not and, in fact, never were. It is the act of adults looking back. It is a ghostly, unreachable fancy.”<sup>19</sup> She literalizes some of the more grotesque, uncanny aspects of the idealized child. And just as the Freudian uncanny effects discomfort through familiarity (the

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<sup>17</sup> See especially Nobile, 292-7; and Katie Jones, “‘Ganz gewöhnlicher Ekel’?: Disgust and Body Motifs in Jenny Erpenbeck’s *Geschichte vom alten Kind*,” in *Pushing at Boundaries: Approaches to Contemporary German Women Writers from Karen Duve to Jenny Erpenbeck*, ed. Heike Bartel and Elizabeth Boa (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 119–33.

<sup>18</sup> Nobile, 305.

<sup>19</sup> Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 5.

*heimisch* in *unheimlich*),<sup>20</sup> the more the girl attempts to approximate the behavior of the children around her, the more they are repulsed by her efforts. Her status as an imperfect replica of actual children parallels the *Heim* itself, whose mission is to create a politically-idealized approximation of a normative childhood for its charges. Indeed, the text itself performs a similar effect, situating itself as an echo of Grass' *Blechtrommel* (the memory-less girl with an empty bucket [*Blecheimer*] serving as a distortion of the historical sweep and creative, rebellious potential of Oskar Mazerath's tin drum), or of the fable-like qualities of Franz Kafka's prose.<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, similar to the texts discussed in previous chapters, Erpenbeck denies the reader full access to the girl's inner life. The narrator reports the girl's actions and thoughts (usually through indirect speech rather than quotation). There are a few, brief instances in which her inner monologue is relayed, but those passages give the reader little that the narrator hasn't already explained. Though the narration hints at reasons for the old child's deceptions, it never completely explains them, instead keeping its characterization of the old child minimal and spare.

*Wörterbuch* takes up many of the same ideas about adults and children, but heightens the focus on the adult investment in children's innocence. Set in an unnamed Latin American dictatorship (strongly resembling Argentina during the Dirty War [1973-84]), the book is narrated by a woman of indeterminate age. At first, her childlike observations and use of language lead the reader to believe the narrator is a young girl; near the end, however, as the dictatorship crumbles, it becomes clear that she is in fact an adult working through early-

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<sup>20</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Das Unheimliche," 1919, in vol 12. of *Gesammelte Werke*, 254.

<sup>21</sup> The protagonist of "Das Urteil" furthermore thinks of his friend as an "altes Kind," suggesting another possible literary antecedent for Erpenbeck's story. See Franz Kafka, "Das Urteil. Eine Geschichte," in *Die Erzählungen und andere ausgewählte Prosa*, ed. Roger Hermes, 9th ed. (1912; Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2006), 48.

childhood trauma. Her father, a member of the country's *junta*, reveals not only his participation in the torture of political prisoners, but also that he is not actually her biological father; he claimed the narrator as his own after torturing her real parents in front of her. Through this revelation, the reader learns that many of the words and phrases repeated throughout the book, seemingly innocent until this point, carry more sinister double meanings. These meanings accrete for the reader as the book progresses, but the narrator herself appears to be trapped in her childhood and a cycle of repetition-compulsion, unable to make these connections due to the trauma she has suffered.<sup>22</sup> In the book's final few pages—the only part of the story narrated in the third person—the reader learns that after the collapse of the dictatorship, the young woman remains faithful to her adoptive parents, visiting her father in prison and keeping a home with her mother.

As in the earlier text, Erpenbeck seeds *Wörterbuch* with occurrences that undercut the narrator's version of events long before her father reveals the truth, suggesting that she was not unaware of his crimes or the nature of the state in which she lives. One of her school friends, Anna, relates matter-of-factly how members of her family were shot, or disappeared under suspicious circumstances. Ghosts of her father's victims—even of those she does not consciously know to be dead—regularly visit her throughout her childhood. The narrator relates the occurrences more or less without reflection, a narrative technique that implies she does not fully comprehend her situation. When it is revealed that she is not a child, the reader understands that she must, on some level, know the full implications of her words. *Wörterbuch* is usually read solely through the lens of the protagonist's trauma, understanding the narrative as an attempt to

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<sup>22</sup> See Sigmund Freud, *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 13 (1920; London: Imago Publishing, 1952), especially 16-8.

come to terms with the past. While trauma and regression are indeed central to understanding the book (to an even greater degree than in Erpenbeck's first book), these readings gloss over the narrative devices Erpenbeck uses to code her protagonist as a child.<sup>23</sup>

In both *Geschichte vom alten Kind* and *Wörterbuch*, Erpenbeck draws on a specific set of tropes in order to suggest to the reader that her protagonists are children, only revealing the truth at the end of each narrative. Furthermore, as with the other texts discussed in this dissertation, childhood plays a pivotal role in the examination of the intersection between the development of the self and larger-scale political changes. Each protagonist experiences a significant rupture at a crucial moment in her development. In the case of the 'old child,' the nature of that disruption is never clarified, though it is implied that she experienced abuse at the hands of her mother. In *Wörterbuch*, however, the moment of trauma is explicitly identified with political trauma and state violence, both of which in turn become embodied in the figure of the narrator's adoptive father.

The extreme lengths that Erpenbeck's protagonists go to in order to reinhabit childhood sets these works apart from those of Wolf and Herta Müller. In *Kindheitsmuster*, the return to childhood (both psychologically and physically, in the form of visiting the place where the narrator grew up) is undertaken with great difficulty, self-consciousness, and shame. Even though the narrator is aware that she has repressed parts of her childhood, it is nothing like the active repression and forgetting undertaken by the protagonists of *Geschichte vom alten Kind* or *Wörterbuch*. In Müller, while adult protagonists recall their childhoods and share their memories with others, they do so in a controlled, voluntary fashion, even when those memories are painful

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<sup>23</sup> An exception here is the discussion of "Kinderperspektiv" in Carsten Gansel, "'Als Kind liebt man, was man kennt' — Kindheit erinnern und erzählen bei Jenny Erpenbeck," in *Wahrheit und Täuschung. Beiträge zum Werk Jenny Erpenbecks*, ed. Friedhelm Marx and Julia Schöll (Göttingen: Wallenstein Verlag, 2014), 94-6.

(and they often are). By way of contrast, in Erpenbeck, the ‘old child’ wants to return to the world of childhood, but does not want to remember her own personal history: what she wants to experience is a kind of generic, idealized childhood. While the narrator of *Geschichte vom alten Kind* indicates that there is some level of conscious behavior and calculation on the part of the ‘old child,’ no such indications exist in *Wörterbuch*. The narrator of *Wörterbuch* enacts a more recognizable form of repetition compulsion, reliving her own childhood memories without any indication that she has been able to consciously work through what has happened to her. She has no access to the memory she most desires (a time prior to her parents’ murders).

In general, part of the nostalgia for childhood stems from a longing for return to a perceived space of moral clarity and legible social hierarchies. Erpenbeck dramatizes this longing, as well as the shaky foundations upon which such nostalgia rests. But it is not only childhood where Erpenbeck’s protagonists locate a morally clear world. What further ties the two pieces together, and also helps explain why Erpenbeck uses the child to tell these stories, is the context of the transition state. *Geschichte* was written in the years following the collapse of the GDR. *Wörterbuch* ends not with the collapse of an authoritarian state, but with the years following it, and strongly implies that the efforts at reparative justice made by the new state are ineffectual. The protagonist dismisses her liberators, and her father, who has committed numerous acts of violence on behalf of his regime, is released from prison after only a few years. Both in Erpenbeck’s writing about the GDR and in her fictive Latin American post-dictatorship, the new state appears not to account for those who were implicated in or benefitted from the previous state’s crimes, even indirectly. These subjects, such as the protagonist of *Wörterbuch*, were not left unscarred by the state’s crimes, but removing the state that supported them leaves

them adrift. The protagonist of *Wörterbuch* is a misfit in the new state, just as the old child does not want to be a part of the world outside of the *Kinderheim*.

Consciously or otherwise, both women seek to turn childhood, a transitional period in life, into a permanent state of being. The temporariness of childhood, as Henry Jenkins has argued, is a key factor in the universalization of children and childhood, related to the erasure of personal history that both protagonists seek:

the very impermanence of childhood, its status as a transitional (and fragile) moment in our life cycle, enables many different symbolic uses [...] Childhood—a temporary state—becomes an emblem for our anxieties about the passing of time, the destruction of historical formations, or conversely, a vehicle for our hopes for the future.<sup>24</sup>

Both novels feature protagonists who seek to allay their fears about the passage of time or the crumbling of states by returning to childhood and trying to make a transitional state permanent. The protagonists long for simplicity, innocence, and even physical regression to a prepubescent, prelapsarian state. Written in the years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany, the protagonist of *Geschichte* attempts to stay permanently in a socialist-like environment, but her ruse is ultimately discovered. In *Wörterbuch*, the protagonist finds herself trapped in a “childhood” of sorts, unable to leave an oppressive family dynamic, even after the state that created and sustained that family has vanished. For her, remaining “childlike” means she will never escape the people responsible for the deaths of her real parents. Though these characters’ efforts end differently, both books show that the reality of childhood is far different than adults’ idealization of it.

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<sup>24</sup> Jenkins, “Introduction: Childhood Innocence and Other Modern Myths,” in Jenkins, *Children’s Culture Reader*, 5.

## “Es ist ein unbeschriebenes Blatt:”<sup>25</sup> Adults and the Construction of Childishness

Before turning to the question of what the explorations of childhood accomplish for these narratives, it is important to first examine the narrative strategies Erpenbeck employs to construct the illusion that her protagonists are children, before revealing the truth. Adults in Erpenbeck’s fiction associate children with innocence, and her protagonists attempt to recreate or recover that innocence for themselves (consciously or otherwise). Their true goal is sloughing off their traumatic pasts in favor of an ahistorical, atemporal state of simplicity and forgetting. They want to achieve a state in which they are untouched by history, memory or trauma. There are significant overlaps in the narrative devices each text uses to make the reader believe that these women are children or “childish,” including children’s innocence and purity; children’s language; and construct children as apart from the political and social orders to which they belong. At the same time, both texts take pains to establish that these characteristics are the ideas of adults, not qualities of actual children.

### *Purity and Innocence*

Sexual innocence is one of the most long-standing tropes associated with children in the modern period.<sup>26</sup> Philippe Ariès has historicized the idea of children’s innocence as a concept, tracing its emergence to seventeenth century Western Europe, when, adults became increasingly intolerant of children’s sexuality, endeavoring to protect upper- and middle-class child from the “pollution of life” through a rigorous moral education.<sup>27</sup> The idea that certain children needed

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<sup>25</sup> Jenny Erpenbeck, *Geschichte vom alten Kind*, 4th ed. (1999; reprint, Munich: btb, 2001), 20.

<sup>26</sup> See e.g. Stockton, 11-5; and Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, trans. Robert Baldick (New York: Knopf, 1962), 114-9.

<sup>27</sup> Ariès, 119. Cf. Kincaid, *Child-Loving*, 61-5.



such protections became naturalized into the belief that all children lacked any conception of sexuality. One of Sigmund Freud's early contributions to psychoanalysis was a refutation of this belief, documenting expressions and explorations of sexuality in infants and young children.<sup>28</sup> Despite Freud's and later scholars' contentions, the aura of innocence associated with children remains remarkably prevalent. It is this ongoing fascination with children's purity that both *Geschichte vom alten Kind* and *Wörterbuch* take to extremes.

The protagonist of *Geschichte* is literally nauseated by any confrontation with sexuality. Notably, every expression of sexuality in the book is between children of the age she claims to be. When she stumbles upon a teenaged couple kissing in a stairwell, she is stricken by a case of hysterical blindness: her desire not to see youthful sexuality is so strong that she becomes physically incapable of seeing anything at all.<sup>29</sup> Getting to know the other adolescent children in the *Kinderheim* does not make her more comfortable with sexuality, either; late in the book, she accidentally discovers a pair of boys engaged in mutual masturbation, and feels so nauseated that she vomits.<sup>30</sup> Her nausea is not limited to witnessing sexuality; merely being asked by other girls what the experience of having a period is like causes her to throw up.<sup>31</sup>

While the children around her enter puberty and flirt with sexuality and desire, the old child<sup>32</sup> actively regresses to a prepubescent state. Significantly, this comes at one of the moments in which the old child most feels she belongs, even as the other children are entering puberty and

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<sup>28</sup> See Sigmund Freud, "Die infantile Sexualität," in *Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie*, in vol. 5 of *Gesammelte Werke*, 73-107. For an overview and critical assessment of Freud's contribution to our understanding of childhood sexuality, see e.g. Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan, or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1984), introduction and chapter one.

<sup>29</sup> Erpenbeck, *Geschichte vom alten Kind*, 28-9.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 104-6.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>32</sup> For the purposes of readability and ease of distinguishing between two unnamed protagonists, I will refer to the protagonist of *Geschichte vom alten Kind* as the "old child."

beginning to leave childhood behind. One day, she falls and skins her knee, and is given a bandage [*Pflaster*] by another girl. She looks lovingly at this bandage, because to her it corresponds

mit den vielen anderen Pflastern, welche viele andere aufgeschlagene Kinderknie schmücken [...]. Es wundert sich nicht darüber, daß es gestürzt ist, denn wer sich im Fleisch der Kinder einnistet, dessen Blut wird Kinderblut, und Kinderblut bahnt sich seinen Weg ins Freie. Es kommt vor, daß Kinder stürzen.<sup>33</sup>

The episode reveals how eager the protagonist is to take on the trappings of childhood. Something as simple and mundane as a bandage symbolizes to her something greater and more universal: children often fall and often bleed, and a child with a bandage on her knee is a sign of a ‘normal’ young child. She believes that she can enter the body of a child as one might settle into lodgings [*sich einnisten*], that her blood might easily become “Kinderblut.” Her object is to turn herself into what she understands as a kind of ‘generic’ child—a type rather than an individual. She has no interest in uniqueness; rather, she wants her *Pflaster* to associate her with the many others that decorate the “viele andere aufgeschlagene Kinderknie.” Immediately following this episode in which she believes herself to possess “Kinderblut,” she stops menstruating: “Von diesem Sturz an hat das Mädchen keine Menstruation mehr, es ist diesen widerwärtigen Geruch los, die Krämpfe und die Übelkeit.”<sup>34</sup> The narrator explicitly associates the bandage episode with the end of the protagonist’s period, as if she has exchanged menstrual blood for “Kinderblut,” puberty for childhood.

The text, however, offsets the protagonist’s beliefs about children by contrasting her with the real children around her. The children instinctively recognize what the adults in the *Heim* do not, which is that she does not belong among them:

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

während das Mädchen ohne weiteres bewirkt, daß die Erwachsenen von ihm sehen, was es will, das sie sehen sollen, [...] so legt es gegenüber den Gleichaltrigen eine echte Unsicherheit an den Tag, die aufreizend wirkt. Der gewaltige Körper des Mädchens befördert noch diese Unsicherheit [...] <sup>35</sup>

The protagonist is adept at manipulating the adults around her because, as an adult herself, she knows what they expect to see from children. In fact, the narrator takes care to point out the purposefulness of the girl's actions through her choice of verbs: "das Mädchen aber weiß;" "[d]as Mädchen aber will [...] bewirken;" "[e]s zwingt die Lehrerin."<sup>36</sup> This level of conscious action is striking, given how she is otherwise described as being passive and unable to absorb information. In this case, however, the girl possesses a different kind of knowledge, unbeknownst to those around her. She does not fear getting an answer wrong in class because, for example, she knows "daß die Schule der Ort ist, an dem geirrt werden muß, damit er überhaupt einen Sinn hat."<sup>37</sup> The other children are anxious about giving incorrect answers because making too many errors might get them held back in school, further delaying their entry into adulthood and acquisition of greater autonomy in the world. They understand the world as children do—they are experiencing school for the first time, without the benefit of hindsight, which makes the consequences of even one wrong answer seem heightened. By contrast, the old child would consider it a success to do so poorly that she would be held back a year, for that would guarantee her another year in the *Heim* among children.

As this example illustrates, what makes the old child successful at conning adults makes the "Gleichaltrigen" around her uneasy. For most of the story, children are discomfited by her presence and her actions; they even lose interest in playing jokes on her when they discover she

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 25, 27.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 22.

doesn't really react to or remember their pranks. They are particularly repulsed by her body, which—to them—does not resemble that of other fourteen-year-olds. They are mistrustful of her, feeling that she does not belong. Their distrust stems not from some instinct particular to children, or any kind of innate authenticity to which they can lay claim. They simply do not understand her behavior; to them, she seems bizarre. The old child unnerves them for the same reasons that the uncanny unnerves: the more she attempts to approximate and mimic their behaviors, the more the other children sense her differentness. Rather than seamlessly blending in with the other children, the old child becomes a grotesque parody of them.

The children only come to a tolerance for her when she proves useful to them, and even then, her act never quite convinces.<sup>38</sup> The old child can never fully assimilate precisely because of the emphasis she places on her own innocence and purity, believing that “nur die eigene Reinheit seinem Aufenthalt hier einen Sinn gibt. [...] Seine eigene Reinheit ist das einzige, was den Verfall jener noch eine kurze Zeit wird aufhalten können [...].”<sup>39</sup> Maintaining her own purity [*Reinheit*], she believes, is her only means of remaining in the *Heim*. It implies not only sexual purity, but hygienic and moral purity as well. This purity is the only thing that can stave off “Verfall,” though what she understands this to mean—sexual experience, ejection from the *Heim*, entry into adulthood—is never clarified. Purity is an integral part of what she understands a child to be, an essential quality of the child.

The adult obsession with children's purity resurfaces in *Wörterbuch*. Whereas the narrator of *Geschichte* highlights moments at which the old child deliberately disassembles or manipulates, the narrator of *Wörterbuch* appears more or less guileless; the text more closely

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<sup>38</sup> See e.g. *ibid.*, 89-90.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

follows the symptoms of trauma, in that it stages “the literal return of the [traumatic] event against the will of the one it inhabits.”<sup>40</sup> The narrator of *Wörterbuch* lives a highly sheltered life, but not by design, as in *Geschichte*. In *Wörterbuch*, the restrictions on the narrator’s personal freedoms are put into place by her adoptive father. While the narrator displays none of the disgust at sexuality shown by the protagonist of *Geschichte*, she also has no opportunity for or interest in sexuality. Her father, however, fixates on his daughter’s innocence, signified again by his valuation of her purity. Many scholars have pointed out that the trope of children’s innocence, particularly when it comes to sexuality, has long been mobilized to marginalize specific populations, and *Wörterbuch* draws directly on this phenomenon.<sup>41</sup> When the narrator’s father explains the truth of her origins, his words are steeped in the rhetoric of reproductive futurism, interjecting repeatedly that “die Kinder sind unsere Zukunft.”<sup>42</sup>

The father’s entire explanation of why he took the narrator after murdering her parents perfectly illustrates the rhetorical mechanisms of social and political control outlined in Lee Edelman’s *No Future*. Edelman argues that conservative politics uses “the Child” (capitalized because it is not a real or historical child, but an idea) in the service of “reproductive futurism,” a vision of a future in which queer people cannot exist. While Edelman focuses his arguments on the exclusion of queer people from legitimate political discourse in the United States, his observations also describe the situation in the world of *Wörterbuch*.<sup>43</sup> The narrator’s father loves

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<sup>40</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 59. See also Caruth, chapter three.

<sup>41</sup> See e.g. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 2-31; Valerie Walkerdine, “Popular Culture and the Eroticization of Little Girls,” in Jenkins, *The Children’s Culture Reader*, , 254–64; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay,” in *ibid.*, 231–40.

<sup>42</sup> Jenny Erpenbeck, *Wörterbuch* (2004; Munich: btb, 2007), 99.

<sup>43</sup> The gendered rhetoric and the father’s obsessive reproductive futurism also reflect the historical Argentina of the Dirty War period, in which the military *junta* cast itself as masculine and unruly civilian population as feminized, and therefore in need of subjugation. On gender and the Dirty War, see Diana Taylor, *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles*

nature-nurture comparisons, telling his daughter that “[d]as Kranke stirbt ab, [...] so wie in der Natur. Uns aber gehört die Zukunft [...]. Und die Zukunft sind unsere Kinder.”<sup>44</sup> His description of the “sick” [*das Kranke*] refers here to socially and politically undesirable human beings, such as the narrator’s biological parents. In describing his actions, he uses the same rhetorical move described by Edelman, in which the child embodies

the telos of the social order and come to be seen as the one for whom that order is held in perpetual trust. [...] That figural Child alone embodies the citizen as ideal, entitled to claim full rights to its future share in the nation’s good, though always at the cost of limiting the rights ‘real’ citizens are allowed.<sup>45</sup>

Even though she had been born to undesirable parents, the narrator embodied that ideal for her adoptive father. He fell in love with her “Unschuld,” telling her, “du warst absolut rein.”<sup>46</sup>

Although the narrator herself is not explicitly concerned with sexuality, the father’s insistence on his daughter’s purity has significant implications for her life. She is infantilized throughout the book, unable to go anywhere by herself or cross the street without holding an adult’s hand until she is seventeen or eighteen. Only when her family is forced to flee their home and take refuge in the mountains does her father decide that she is old enough to know why they are being pursued; “Du bist ja kein Kind mehr,” he says as he tells her about his history of torturing people.<sup>47</sup> He determines her status as a child, and as an innocent, deciding when she needs supervision, and when she is “kein Kind mehr.” Throughout his entire monologue on his crimes, the narrator repeatedly references the fact that she is sitting on his lap, even falling asleep

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*of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina’s “Dirty War”* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), especially 59-90 and 183-222.

<sup>44</sup> Erpenbeck, *Wörterbuch*, 99.

<sup>45</sup> Edelman, 11.

<sup>46</sup> Erpenbeck, *Wörterbuch*, 101, 102.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

there for long stretches of time, a behavior usually associated with a young child rather than a young woman. The narrator's representation of herself as a child or childlike is thus not the same kind of conscious manipulation enacted by the protagonist of *Geschichte*. Instead, it is an absorption of this infantilization and her father's narrative about her, as well as a kind of regression. Their relationship furthermore mirrors the relationship of the authoritarian state to its beneficiaries: while some are marginalized and face violent oppression, others are deemed worthy of carrying that state forward, and therefore worthy of being protected, albeit with no say in what that protection looks like.<sup>48</sup>

Though his words echo the Nazi discourse about the *Erbkranke*, purity, and eugenics, he does not quite reproduce their philosophy, moving away from the National Socialist emphasis on inheritance. His version of reproductive futurism is more invested in the “nurture” side of the nature-nurture equation because this allows him to deny any influence that the narrator's biological family might have had on her. He refuses to acknowledge her biological mother as such, referring to her only as “die Frau, die dich geboren hat.”<sup>49</sup> He depicts her as merely a means to the narrator's birth: “Man wird, so heißt es, sagt er, durch eine Mutter geboren, nicht von einer Mutter.”<sup>50</sup> The shift in pronoun dramatically changes the position of the mother. In German, the preposition *von* is used to indicate the agency of a person in the passive voice; the preposition *durch* is used for an object or other non-animate concept. He dehumanizes her biological mother even at the level of language, because for his daughter to remain “absolut rein,” she cannot be tainted by the crimes of her subversive parents.

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<sup>48</sup> This dynamic can also be seen in Christa Wolf's *Kindheitsmuster*, in which ‘Aryan’ German children like Nelly can be sheltered from the effects of National Socialism; the extent of the internalization of that privileged position is one object of Wolf's fascination in that book. See chapter two.

<sup>49</sup> Erpenbeck, *Wörterbuch*, 100.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

Even before this episode, the narrator attributes her “birth” to her adoptive father rather than her adoptive mother: “Mein Vater hat meiner Mutter ein Kind geschenkt.”<sup>51</sup> Any overt sexuality associated with the act of conceiving a child is gone. The narrator imagines herself as a fruit ripening on a vine, which her adoptive father plucked and gave to his wife.<sup>52</sup> Reproductive futurism, in his estimation, does not depend on sexuality or the biology of inheritance; denying the influence of “nature” enables her father to further remove his daughter from any association with sexuality, recalling the immaculate conception of Mary or the creation of Adam and Eve by God.

#### *Language and the “Childlike” Mind: Metaphors, Jokes, and Mimicry*

When the narrator of *Wörterbuch* imagines her father plucking a fruit, she is interpreting a metaphorical expression, “Frucht der Liebe,” in literal terms.<sup>53</sup> Literal thinking, expressed here through her inability to grasp figurative language, is a method of characterization used throughout *Wörterbuch* and *Geschichte* to signify a “childlike” mind.

Erpenbeck makes her protagonists’ understanding of language (or lack thereof) do the work of illustrating their “childishness.” For the most part, they are only able to understand language in the most literal of terms. As the case of “Frucht der Liebe” illustrates, they are usually unable to comprehend figures of speech. After the protagonist of *Geschichte vom alten Kind* is found on the street holding an empty bucket [*Blecheimer*], one of the police officers she meets says to her sardonically, “Alles im Eimer, was.”<sup>54</sup> But the old child does not realize she

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 73-4.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>54</sup> Erpenbeck, *Geschichte vom alten Kind*, 8.



has been insulted, instead apparently taking the expression to mean that literally everything she has (i.e., nothing) is in the empty bucket. Jokes are also wasted on her when she lives in the *Heim*; she takes them too literally and does not laugh.<sup>55</sup> Like metaphors, jokes require higher-order thinking, including the understanding that words can have multiple significations. Young children, however, lack this capacity, treating words as “things” (“als Dinge”) rather than symbols, and expecting words to have a single meaning.<sup>56</sup> The old child’s inability to understand humor serves as another signifier of her apparent “childishness.” However, there is still something unsettling about her inability to understand: she mimics behavior ordinarily observed in young children, but claims to be fourteen years old, an age at which she should be able to comprehend figurative language.

While the inability of the old child to understand figurative language is explained by the third-person narrator of *Geschichte*, the issue of the complexity or simplicity of language plays out differently in *Wörterbuch*. Told in the first person, the narrator offers very little reflection on what she says, apparently unaware of her own limited understanding. Instead, the reader must piece together the multiple layers of meaning as the story progresses. This approach is in some ways reminiscent of Herta Müller’s “Niederungen,” which eschews narratorial connection between scenes; Erpenbeck’s narrators, however, intervene and explain far more than Müller’s.

As part of the conceit of “childishness,” the narrator often repeats sentences she has heard in different contexts, which color their meaning. Often these are short, declarative sentences, the simplicity of the language meant to mimic the “simplicity” of children. When learning about the geography of her country and the currents of the water the protagonist tells her nursemaid and

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 42-3.

<sup>56</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewußten*, 1905, vol. 6 of *Gesammelte Werke*, 134.

later her teacher, “Mein Vater kennt sich mit den Strömungen aus.”<sup>57</sup> She repeats this information throughout the book, as a child might talk about a beloved parent. (Again, something associated with much younger children, and takes on a more sinister feeling when the reader learns that this immaturity has lingered into the narrator’s late adolescence.)

But at the end of the book, this sentence takes on other associations for the narrator. As in English, “currents” [*Strömungen*] can refer to both water currents and electrical currents. The narrator’s father, it turns out, is well-versed in both. He describes to her that electricity is the best means for torturing a person, and that to get people to talk, he electrocuted their children in front of them.<sup>58</sup> Currents again come into play when he describes participating in death flights, in which he threw prisoners (the narrator’s real parents among them) into the ocean; his knowledge of the patterns of water circulation ensures that their bodies will never be found.<sup>59</sup> In *Wörterbuch*, then, what first appears to be evidence that the narrator is a young child proves to be a feint on the part of the author; by the end of the book, the reader understands that this is not a young child first encountering language, but a traumatized woman attempting to sift through the myriad of ways in which her adoptive family has used language to betray her.

In both books, the repetition of words and phrases, especially short ones, contributes to the illusion of “childishness.” The protagonist of *Geschichte vom alten Kind* uses repetition as well, repeating words and expressions in her attempts to fit in. The third-person narrator of *Geschichte* relates the effects of the protagonist’s language on others. Early in her time at the *Kinderheim*, she overhears some girls talking about lunch and attempts to engage another girl in conversation by mimicking the same pleasantries. But the other girl refuses to respond; the old

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<sup>57</sup> Erpenbeck, *Wörterbuch*, 32, 34.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 92-3.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

child is rejected: “Da spießt ihm dieser Satz aus der Seite heraus, den es bei seinen Mitschülerinnen gestohlen hat.”<sup>60</sup> Parroting and mimicry are processes by which young children learn and internalize language and behaviors; the other children recognize it as false coming from the protagonist, supposedly a teenager. Once again, her self-presentation and her appearance are out of step. She is not participating in the social order as one of their equals (recall that her desire is not to be their equal but to be on the lowest rung of their hierarchy); instead, she is “stealing” [*stehlen*] their words, just as she has manipulated her way into their midst. Her simplicity of language, her mimicry, and her apparent incapability of higher-order thinking are all ways in which the text codes her as a child. Erpenbeck uses the other children’s rejection of the girl, however, to render her “childishness” suspect. There is no indication that the other children know her to be an imposter; it is more of an instinctual mistrust. (As in Wolf and Müller, Erpenbeck portrays children as sensitive to social cues; the old child’s lack of ability to read her environment is one way in which the author signals her otherness.) Even when she outright copies their exact words, the old child fails to convince them that she is one of them. One can speculate as to why this might be—because she is an outsider; because she fails to make the language her own; because it sounds artificial—but these would only be guesses, for no explanation is given.

The old child also attempts to “steal” words from a film, another effort culminating in failure. In stereotypically Socialist fashion, the film features a heroic *Bäuerin* resistor as its heroine; just before she is killed, she tells the men who come to take her farm, “Nur mit den Füßen zuerst!”<sup>61</sup> Whether or not the old child fully understands what the woman means is

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<sup>60</sup> Erpenbeck, *Geschichte vom alten Kind*, 39.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

unclear (though it is unlikely, given the events that have transpired thus far), but at the end of the story, when she must be transferred to a state hospital, she repeats the woman's words from the film. Lacking context, the nurse lifting her onto the stretcher responds, "Aber ja, [...] ist doch klar."<sup>62</sup> Even this brief moment of protest is lost. Although the protagonist lacks the capacity for irony, the reader understands this as a sardonic parody of the earlier film, and by extension, the historical myth of the heroic antifascist resistor promoted by the SED.<sup>63</sup>

In both *Geschichte vom alten Kind* and *Wörterbuch*, the protagonists' use of language—repetition, literalism, and an inner life at odds with apparent reality—serve to construct the illusion of childishness. Using these narrative strategies plays to expectations about children and how they act in order to convince the reader that the protagonists really are children, just as the old child tries to convince everyone at the *Kinderheim* that she belongs there.

### *Between Fantasy and Reality*

When not mimicking, the old child is mostly silent, but she does receive a few brief moments of internal monologue. There are only four of them, all occurring within the first half of the narrative. Offset by paragraph breaks from the main narrative, these passages of *ich*-narration are usually only a few sentences long. The first three largely correspond with what has just happened in the narrative. After she convinces her teachers that she is hopeless, for example, she thinks to herself, "Ich bin das Schwächste. Keines von den Findlingen, die mich umgeben, ist schwächer als ich."<sup>64</sup> This first-person narration (and this is the passage in its entirety) tells us

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>63</sup> On the myth of the antifascist resistor, see Julia Hell, *Post-Fascist Fantasies: Psychoanalysis, History, and the Literature of East Germany* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), introduction.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 28.

little about the protagonist that we do not already know from the narrator. It reads like a mantra, as if the old child is internalizing this idea about herself via repetition.<sup>65</sup> Another passage ends with her wondering, “Warum spricht niemand mit mir?,” showing the reader that she lacks self-awareness.<sup>66</sup>

The final *ich*-passage, however, reveals a glimpse of an inner life, narrated in fairy-tale-like terms:

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.<sup>67</sup>

This comes between two passages that focus heavily on her body, emphasizing its unwieldiness and the revulsion it inspires in her classmates. Immediately preceding this passage, some classmates shackle her to a fence using a bicycle lock. When the narration returns to the third person, the children are playing another trick on the girl. The girl willingly participates in these pranks, the narrator says, because “[d]as Mädchen weiß, daß sein Körper eine Schuld ist, es will diese Schuld gern abtragen, daher befolgt es die Gebote seiner Klassenkameraden aufs peinlichste.”<sup>68</sup> The emphasis on her body and its grotesqueness in the two passages surrounding the inner monologue sharply contrast with the palace of straw she imagines around herself. The world of her imagination is also wildly out of step with the imagery of the rest of the book, which is largely grounded in the concrete, everyday world around the old child.

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<sup>65</sup> Cf. Freud on repetition compulsion, in e.g. “Jenseits des Lustprinzips,” 18 - 66.

<sup>66</sup> Erpenbeck, *Geschichte vom alten Kind*, 33.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

The brief moment of inner monologue suggests that the girl has a more fanciful inner life than her actions (or the narrator) would betray. The image she conjures is an almost dreamlike assemblage of images culled from fairy tales, including “The Three Little Pigs” (who construct a dwelling of straw) and “Baba Yaga” (often depicted as having a house on chicken legs<sup>69</sup>). At the same time, the old child adds her own elements of vulnerability and violence: the slaughter of a chicken, storms, the threat of fire. The passage hints at a tumultuous inner life and past, which the girl takes great care to push out of her consciousness and conceal from those around her. The use of the fairy tale resonates with the story thematically: though popularly believed to be “for children,” the original tales are often dark, violent, and without moral lessons. Only later were they edited with an eye to what is “appropriate” for children.<sup>70</sup>

Prior to the revelation that she is actually an adult, this internal monologue would suggest that the old child possesses a “childlike” mind—that is, one that blends the fantastical with the everyday. The misery inflicted on her by her classmates does not touch her because her inner life shields her emotionally; that inner world, however, is a palace of straw, liable to catch fire, with a precarious foundation (a chicken foot). Later, with the revelation that the “old child” is a woman, this straw palace can retrospectively be understood as her refuge among the children; similarly, her large body temporarily shields others from the knowledge that she is an adult.

The blending of fantasy and reality as a function of the child’s mind is further thematized throughout *Wörterbuch*, but with an eye towards the way this assumption is mobilized to keep children in their place. Adults repeatedly tell the narrator that children are unable to differentiate

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<sup>69</sup> See Andreas Johns, *Baba Yaga: The Ambiguous Mother and Witch of the Russian Folktale* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), chapter four.

<sup>70</sup> See Maria Tatar, *Off with Their Heads!: Fairy Tales and the Culture of Childhood* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992). See also Introduction and Chapter One of this dissertation.

between imagination and reality in order to prevent her from remembering her earlier life. The narrator recalls being alone in a concrete room, and asks if her father if it was real or a dream:

Na, siehst du, gibt er [der Vater] zur Antwort, wenn man ein Kind ist, kann man noch nicht unterscheiden, was Traum und was Wirklichkeit ist. [...] Der Kopf, den ich bewohne, war schon immer von fremden Träumen möbliert, kommt mir vor. Da falle ich von Zeit zu Zeit hin oder laufe gegen irgendwas oder klemme mich ein. Vater und Mutter.<sup>71</sup>

Here again, the child's mind is imagined as a physical space; in this case, it is full of "fremde[] Träume[]," which have the same materiality as the "reality" of her mind, and upon which the narrator occasionally stumbles. As in *Geschichte vom alten Kind*, this passage takes on new significance when the truth about her past is revealed. Her adoptive father had assured her that the concrete room was the mere product of her imperfect grasp of reality. With the father's revelation, however, the reader comes to understand that this was not a dream at all, but a memory of being held captive while her parents were being tortured. Here, then, the construction of "childishness" is part of the father's repertoire of psychological manipulation; by infantilizing her, he keeps her from believing her own memories or suspecting the truth about her origins. Childhood, here, cannot be understood as a purely "natural" state or a function of age; it is also a function of social and familial relationships. In *Wörterbuch*, keeping the narrator "childlike" allows the father to evade his daughter's questions about her memories, and even dismiss them as fabrications. Rendering her own memories suspect is one means of retaining power over her.

The psychological process by which the adoptive father keeps the narrator powerless can furthermore be mapped onto the book's political backdrop, especially given its Latin American setting. As Diana Taylor has argued, Argentina's military *junta* cast itself as a masculine-gendered father figure to the nation; its feminine counterpart was not a person or political body,

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<sup>71</sup> Erpenbeck, *Wörterbuch*, 46.

but the abstract concept of the nation, or *Patria*. Citizens were figured in this construction as children, and therefore needed to be prevented from becoming rebellious or unruly. And at the same time as it cast itself as a national family and protector of the nuclear family, the *junta* ripped actual families apart.<sup>72</sup> Julia Hell has identified a similar tendency in the literature of East Germany, arguing that “the family narrative easily lends itself to the ideological project of constructing a coherent paternal order, advocating a form of unity centered on the figure of the father, and emphasizing the present's unbreakable connection to the past.”<sup>73</sup> *Wörterbuch* picks up on this identification of the father with the state: the adoptive father stands in for the violence his government has done to its populace, and especially to families. His attempts to convince the narrator that her memories are only dreams also reveals how the authoritarian state attempts to erase and rewrite the past (personal and collective) of an entire generation. One means of doing so is to unsettle its populace’s sense of reality and normalcy, enabling the *junta* to establish itself as the sole arbiter of truth.

### *Children and Complicity*

Through the pretense of childishness, both protagonists attempt to claim a larger kind of innocence from implication in more nefarious political and social situations. In *Geschichte vom alten Kind*, the protagonist finally achieves her coveted place on the lowest rung of the *Kinderheim*’s social order by concealing evidence of other children’s misdeeds. She holds some stolen money for a boy, does not report him to the teachers, and then returns the money to him. After this incident, the other children discover that she can be useful to them:

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<sup>72</sup> See Taylor, chapters three and four, especially 88-9.

<sup>73</sup> Julia Hell, *Post-Fascist Fantasies: Psychoanalysis, History, and the Literature of East Germany* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 35-6.



Das Mädchen ist verwendbar. Von da an verspürt das Mädchen eine Verschiebung der Fronten, eine Art kollektiven Windwechsels, dessen Ursache ihm verborgen bleibt. [...] Es verstummt, ohne zu wissen, daß das Stummsein die erste Eigenschaft ist, die seine Klassenkameraden an ihm schätzen.<sup>74</sup>

Conveniently, the girl's inability to connect cause and effect also prevents her from having to acknowledge the source of her newfound acceptance: the reason for the shift in her classmates' attitude towards her simply "remains hidden." Like some citizens of authoritarian societies—the GDR among them—she finds a secure position through the selective acquisition of information. Her goal, however, is not to ingratiate herself with the authorities (as it would be for state informants), but with her peers. But this strategy has its limits. Although she is useful to the other children, she cannot form close, interpersonal relationships precisely because of the quality they value in her: her *Verstummen*. When other girls share their stories and secrets with her, she has none of her own to give in return, nor does she understand that such a back-and-forth would be the basis of friendship.<sup>75</sup> But friendship is ultimately not what she wants; she wants to stay in the *Heim* and keep her place.

The protagonist's exercise in complicity seems relatively low-stakes when compared to the situation in *Wörterbuch*. The narrative itself is structured by the effects of trauma and repression, making it difficult to determine whether or to what degree the protagonist was aware of the reality of what was happening around her. Despite her own conscious inability to understand, the narrative hints that she was not entirely unaware of her father's crimes. Throughout her childhood, the narrator is visited by people only she can see; by the end of the book, it is clear that these people are ghosts.

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<sup>74</sup> Erpenbeck, *Geschichte vom alten Kind*, 72-3.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 89-91.

In the context of personal and political trauma, ghosts and hauntings signify a return of the repressed.<sup>76</sup> Among *Wörterbuch*'s ghosts are the narrator's parents; the daughter of her nursemaid; and a girl who once sang a subversive song at the conservatory she attends. These apparitions suggest obliquely that the narrator had an inkling of her father's actions. For example, after her nursemaid quits, the nursemaid's daughter, Marie, whom the narrator thinks of as her "Milchschwester" because they shared milk from the same woman, appears in her room. But she does not appear as she always has: the narrator sees "daß sie keine Hände mehr hat, kurz über dem Gelenk sind sie ihr abgeschnitten."<sup>77</sup> Later, when the narrator's father reveals the extent of his crimes, he mentions the nursemaid's daughter almost incidentally. Angry at the nursemaid for telling his daughter stories about a folk hero, Difunta Correa, he had Marie kidnapped, and the girl's hands sent to her mother (he understands this as a better solution to kidnapping the nursemaid herself). One surmises he objected to his daughter learning this story because it valorizes the sacrifice of a mother, or because she is a folk-religious figure rather than a sanctioned figure of the Catholic Church. (He never elaborates.) Regardless, the reader learns that the most minor of infractions can lead to this man's violent wrath. Marie's appearance implies not only some awareness of her father's crimes, but the psychic burden of living with this volatile, powerful person on the narrator. (The story also further ties Erpenbeck's narrative to the genre of the *Märchen*: a story called "Mädchen ohne Hände" appeared in the first volume of the Grimms' *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* [1812], in which a father chops off his daughter's hands at the behest of the devil.)

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<sup>76</sup> See e.g. Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2008), especially chapters two and three.

<sup>77</sup> Erpenbeck, *Wörterbuch*, 66.

It is possible to read the ghosts who appear in *Wörterbuch* as truly supernatural apparitions, in the vein of a Gothic or horror story, or as manifestations of the narrator's own repressed memories and/or sense of guilt. These interpretations are not necessarily mutually exclusive. How literally to interpret the ghosts, however, is beside the point. That ghosts appear in the narrative at all is significant, particularly given the story's political context. Avery Gordon argues that ghosts should be understood in social and political terms:

The ghost is not simply a dead or missing person, but a social figure and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life. The ghost or the apparition is one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us, in its own way, of course.<sup>78</sup>

For Gordon, hauntings represent an intrusion of the repressed into social life; ghosts are what exceed the capacity for repression. Gordon examines ghosts in a context that is particularly salient here, namely state-sponsored disappearance and the *desaparecidos* of Argentina's Dirty War. In the case of political violence, the absence of a body or any official record of the victim's death makes disappearance distinct from death, because the state does not need to acknowledge the person's existence at all; the lack of bodily remains also denies closure to those who knew the disappeared. Disappearance works to cultivate fear and silence among the living.<sup>79</sup> The appearance of the ghost of someone disappeared, therefore, not only reminds the living of their loss, but of the state that disappeared their friends and families, and might well do the same to them.<sup>80</sup> The ghosts who appear to the narrator of *Wörterbuch* signify what her father and the state he represents are capable of, and the people they have made disappear—but whose memory they cannot completely erase.

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<sup>78</sup> Gordon, 8.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

The adoptive father's crimes permeate every part of the narrator's life. Even her language is tainted by her trauma, except for the few words she learned prior to her abduction: "Vater und Mutter. Ball. Auto. Das vielleicht die einzigen Wörter, die heil waren, als ich sie lernte."<sup>81</sup> These words were learned from her biological parents before they were murdered, and even of this, she cannot be sure. She seeks words that are healed or whole [*heil*], with clear meanings (as one might find in the dictionary alluded to by the book's title). By the end of the book she barely speaks, only echoing her adoptive father with words of agreement. She can no longer trust her own senses, asking, "Wozu sind denn meine Augen da, wenn sie sehen, aber nichts sehen? Wozu meine Ohren, wenn sie hören, aber nichts hören?"<sup>82</sup> The ghosts are proof of what she has tried not to see or hear, hinted at but not explained in the book's opening lines. Though she seems not to understand when people are arrested before her eyes, or disappear forever, their reappearance as ghosts signifies the return of the repressed—that which she has tried not to see or hear.

Through the actions of her protagonists, Erpenbeck highlights the strangeness of adult conceptions of the child. Children who really behaved as adults expect, the texts suggest, would be uncanny and bizarre. Erpenbeck teases out the implications of adults' ideas about children and takes them to their logical conclusions, rendering them grotesque and tragic. In doing so, she also highlights the parallels that can be found between the construction of childhood and the construction of the relationship between the authoritarian state and its citizens.

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<sup>81</sup> Erpenbeck, *Wörterbuch*, 9.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

## **Protections and Restrictions: Patterns of Authoritarianism in the Erpenbeck'schen Childhood**

Often overlooked in the romanticization of children and childhood is the fact that children have very little power or autonomy relative to adults. When the old child seeks to enter the “lowest” position of the social hierarchy, she is accomplishing that not only through her interactions with children, but through the very act of pretending to be a child. Performing the role of the child means she sacrifices the ability to make a substantial number of decisions for herself; this lack of choice seems to be part of what she seeks when taking on the guise of a child. Both *Geschichte vom alten Kind* and *Wörterbuch*, emphasize the relative powerlessness of childhood. But the book's adult protagonists do not come to (re)inhabit a normative childhood. Instead, they find themselves in unusually restrictive forms of dependency (the narrator of *Wörterbuch* helplessly repeating her trauma, the old child confined to the *Kinderheim*), in which their shelter and security rests on being beholden to a strict set of rules and limitations on their own bodies.

### *Protection Over Freedom*

Many modern conceptions of childhood are predicated on establishing legal, social, and cultural control over children, as a substantial body of scholarship has shown.<sup>83</sup> Stockton has argued that under normative circumstances, a kind of “legal strangeness” defines the child, in that the child is understood to “need protections more than freedoms.”<sup>84</sup> This turns the child into

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<sup>83</sup> On the legal status of children as products of “managed growth,” see e.g. Stockton 30 – 41; on cultural narratives and pedagogies of fear, see e.g. Maria Tatar, *Off with Their Heads!: Fairy Tales and the Culture of Childhood* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 30-40, 53-66; on power relations between children and adults and children's lack of political agency, see e.g. Henry Jenkins, “Introduction.”

<sup>84</sup> Stockton, 16.

“a creature of *gradual growth* and *managed delay*, bolstered by laws that ideally will protect it from its own participation in its pleasure and its pain. For if the child is innocent, it is also weak.”<sup>85</sup> Significantly, this description of the child’s legal position—requiring protection over freedom—also echoes the paternalistic language of authoritarian states: restrictions on civil liberties are justified in the name of security. Erpenbeck’s fiction emphasizes the child’s weakness. Both narratives are set in environments in which the protagonists’ freedoms are heavily limited in the service of their protection and moral education. However, whereas the old child embraces the restrictive environment around her, the narrator of *Wörterbuch* ends up clinging to old hierarchies out of a sense of helplessness and hopelessness.

In *Geschichte vom alten Kind*, the *Kinderheim* is so invested in instilling children with the ethos of communality that even underwear is shared amongst the “Kollektivleib.”<sup>86</sup> Paradoxically, however, fact, the old child’s weakness (or rather, her appearance of weakness) becomes a source of strength at times. She manipulates her teachers by making them feel she is hopelessly incapable of learning:

Es zwingt die Leherin geradezu, es aufzurufen, seine Demutshaltung ist wie ein Sog, der den bösen Willen der anderen, den der Lehrerin eingeschlossen, auf sich zieht. [...] Daß das Mädchen selbst sie mittels eines Soges förmlich gezwungen hat, es zu traktieren, weiß die Lehrerin natürlich nicht.<sup>87</sup>

Through her manipulation (the narrator describes her actions as “*zwingen*”) she is able to avoid some responsibilities—learning and progressing in school—while still technically obeying the institution’s rules. In creating a manipulative character, Erpenbeck draws on adult fears of children. These fears are often popularly expressed in popular culture through the trope of the

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>86</sup> Erpenbeck, *Geschichte vom alten Kind*, 15.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 27-8.

evil child, who covertly effects destruction while hiding behind the guise of innocence.<sup>88</sup>

Erpenbeck, however, does not go quite that far; the old child is neither evil, nor a child. Andrea Bartl has argued that the protagonist of *Geschichte vom alten Kind* belongs to a different trope, which she terms “das unangenehme Kind.”<sup>89</sup>

The “unangenehmes Kind,” Bartl argues, is not evil, but an outsider whose grotesque body and passivity provokes extreme reactions in those around her, including hatred, shame, disgust, and fear.<sup>90</sup> While it is important to distinguish again that Jenny Erpenbeck’s story is not about a real child,<sup>91</sup> but an adult pretending to be a child, Bartl’s taxonomy is a compelling one, particularly the argument that the “unangenehmes Kind” in general, and the old child in particular, ultimately has no long-term effect on her social environment: “Zwar übererfüllt das Mädchen die Ordnungsregeln des Heimes, aber die Ordnung des Heimes selbst bleibt dadurch auf irritierende Weise unangetastet.”<sup>92</sup> Though she manipulates adults to her advantage, and in doing so, exposes the limits of the system meant to support and educate children, the old child cannot be understood as a figure of resistance. Rather, she understands the system of authority around her—better than anyone else—and exploits them to her advantage. She does not bend or break rules; she acts only in her own interest. While all children at some point learn about and

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<sup>88</sup> On the trope of the evil child in popular culture, see e.g. Dominic Lennard, *Bad Seeds and Holy Terrors: The Child Villains of Horror Film* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014); on the uses of the evil child trope in children’s culture, especially fairy tales, see Tatar, especially Introduction and chapters one and two.

<sup>89</sup> For a genealogy, definition, and interpretation of the “unangenehmes Kind,” see Andrea Bartl, “Der Typus des ‘unangenehmen Kindes’—und seine Variation in Jenny Erpenbecks *Geschichte vom alten Kind*,” in Marx and Schöll, 111–24.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 113–7.

<sup>91</sup> In fact, many of the examples of the “unangenehmes Kind” given by Bartl—Doris Lessing’s *The Fifth Child*, Roman Polanski’s *Rosemary’s Baby*, John Moore’s *The Omen*, Jaume Collet-Serra’s *Orphan*—are either not human or are not really children. This suggests that the trope of the “imposter child”—itself standing in for a fear that the protections extended to the child in the name of its “innocence” will be taken advantage of, to the detriment of the adults responsible for that child—is fairly widespread, and deserving of consideration on its own terms.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

test the boundaries of their agency—a generalized process explored in the works of Christa Wolf and Herta Müller—the case of the old child is somewhat different. The old child is able to move through a restrictive environment in a somewhat unique way because she is not truly a child (the children around her lack the perspective that enables her to strategize in this way); the story implies that, for the person who knows how to work the system, there is an advantage to be found in the appearance of needing protection. Whereas her classmates are hungry to escape childhood, she wants to exist forever as a fourteen-year-old in a world whose rules she already understands.

There are fewer advantages to be found in a childhood under an authoritarian system for the narrator of *Wörterbuch*. But having grown up in a highly restrictive environment and just learned that the man who raised her murdered her real parents, she seems unable to function in the post-authoritarian society that emerges after her father's arrest. She reacts with laconic disinterest to the people who overthrow the *junta* and liberate her. When they try to tell her about the fate of her real parents, she answers, "Jaja, [...] ich weiß" and, using the Subjunctive I form to effect a degree of distance, tells the reader, "Ich sei nun befreit."<sup>93</sup> When her would-be liberators ask her what she wants to do with her life, now that "mein Vater und meine Mutter ins Gefängnis müßten und mein Vater und meine Mutter schon lange tot sind," she responds, "Schlafen."<sup>94</sup> She stays in the house where she grew up, and when her adoptive mother is released from prison, they go on living together as they always had, and wait for her adoptive father to come home. Her circumstances at the end of the book are not far-fetched; in Argentina, some of those suspected of being children of *desaparecidos* have refused DNA tests to confirm

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<sup>93</sup> Erpenbeck, *Wörterbuch*, 104.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*



their identities, in part because it could be used as evidence against the adoptive families with whom they have grown up.<sup>95</sup>

The narrator also remains mentally locked in childhood, narrating her story without a sense of critical distance or the insight that might come with the passage of time. Her life is not characterized by occasional remembrances of her trauma, “but rather the endless *inherent necessity* of repetition, which ultimately may lead to destruction.”<sup>96</sup> The comparison with the protagonist of *Geschichte* is striking here—even though the old child mostly speaks in mimicry and actively seeks to forget the past, the close third-person narration reveals that there is thought and choice behind her performance of childhood. She has clear, sometimes counterintuitive insights about the nature of childhood, learning, and social hierarchies. The narrator of *Wörterbuch*, however, is paralyzed by trauma, which manifests in her anxiety over the fact that words contain multiple, contradictory meanings (such as in the repetition of “mein Vater und meine Mutter” above).<sup>97</sup>

In both narratives, the protagonists’ powerlessness is made manifest through extreme restrictions on movement. The old child cannot leave the premises of the *Kinderheim*, a prohibition that does not bother her. For her, returning to the outside would mean returning to her origin—standing on the street, alone, with an empty bucket. In *Wörterbuch*, the limitations on the narrator come from her parents. She is not allowed to go anywhere by herself, even when she expresses interest in doing so. Narratively, this circumscribes both protagonists to closed, rigidly hierarchical social circles. Children’s movements might be proscribed under ordinary

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<sup>95</sup> See e.g. Noa Vaisman, “Relational Human Rights: Shed-DNA and the Identification of the ‘Living Disappeared’ in Argentina,” *Journal of Law & Society* 41, no. 3 (2014): 398.

<sup>96</sup> Caruth, 63. Italics in original.

<sup>97</sup> Cf. Freud, *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewußten*, 134.

circumstances, but in the case of both texts, the protagonists' worlds are limited in order to control what outside influences they are able to come into contact with. The children who populate *Geschichte* will eventually age out, perhaps having internalized the spirit of collectivity and comradeship instilled in them by the *Heim*.

The *Wörterbuch* narrator's parents, however, seem to desire indefinite control over their adopted daughter. Because of her father's insistence that children are shaped by their environs rather than genetic inheritance, it follows that he wants to rigidly control any influence that might potentially corrupt her. She is prevented from most contact with the outside world, and those who might accidentally expose her to an unauthorized culture or viewpoint are tortured. He even seeks to 'protect' her from the knowledge of what the society he is building is really like, and the violence underpinning their daily lives. The reader, however, only catches glimpses of the outside world through the narrator's eyes (much of what she learns is simply explained to her at the end). Her main experience is a lonely interior life, lived among her adoptive family and the ghosts who haunt her bedroom.

### *Some Children Are More Equal Than Others*

Stockton and others have pointed out that when people speak of the child in need of protection in normative discourse, the child they imagine is usually white and middle class. "It is a privilege," she writes, "to need to be protected—and to be sheltered—and thus to have a childhood."<sup>98</sup> Here we run into some of the challenges of translating the terms of Anglo-American cultural criticism into other contexts—the concept of the middle class/bourgeoisie having different connotations in a Socialist or authoritarian context—but in general, her point

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<sup>98</sup> Stockton, 31.

about the relationship between privilege and protection is a salient one when reading Erpenbeck's books. In both fictional worlds, children are not all valued equally.

*Geschichte vom alten Kind* thematizes the gap between the stated ideals of a society and the reality of lived experience. Though the old child has no interest in individuality and even takes comfort in the spirit of comradeship articulated by the adults around her, she has no illusions about the actual social relationships in the *Heim*. When adults come to visit—parents and would-be parents—she observes them interacting with the children, and knows that some of her peers will never be adopted:

Es gibt Kinder, so unrein, so riesig oder rauh, daß sie nicht einmal abgewiesen werden müssen, man sieht sie gar nicht erst an, weil sie nicht durch das Sieb passen, das für die Auswahl gewebt ist. Sie sind da, aber sehen kann man sie nicht.<sup>99</sup>

All the real children desire to leave that place, but only some are desirable enough to have a chance at doing so. Some are also in danger of being labeled “schwer erziehbar;” these children are transferred to a stricter home for “ihresgleichen,” where their lives will be more difficult.<sup>100</sup> The protagonist knows that she belongs to the category of invisible, unwanted children, but the thought does not bother her. Her purpose is not to escape the *Heim*. On the contrary, “das Mädchen [ist] genau im Gegenteil in ein solches umzäuntes Gebiet, in ein Kinderheim eben, eingebrochen.”<sup>101</sup> Her desire to stay in the closed-off world of the *Heim* is in fact one of the hallmarks of her abnormality.

The narrator of *Geschichte* relates these observations with detachment; they convey to the reader that the old child—who seems to the outside world to be developmentally delayed and unable to understand social norms—nonetheless possesses a sophisticated understanding of the

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<sup>99</sup> Erpenbeck, *Geschichte vom alten Kind*, 10.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

reality of institutions dedicated to protecting childhood. By way of contrast, the first-person narrator of *Wörterbuch* lacks this sense of self-awareness, reporting without appearing to always understand. Her adoptive parents and grandparents tell her repeatedly about her family's European heritage; in a somewhat heavy-handed revelation, her father tells her that her adoptive mother's father had been a Nazi concentration camp guard.<sup>102</sup> Conversely, her friend Anna's mother is "Indianerin."<sup>103</sup> Anna's stories about her family members' gruesome deaths are convoluted—at first she claims her mother was trampled by a horse ("ein schöner Tod für eine Indianerin"), then that her parents have been away for a year or two on a cruise around the world.<sup>104</sup> Her older and younger sisters are also dead. Later, the narrator learns that Anna's parents were tortured (possibly by her adoptive father) in front of their seven-year-old daughter, who subsequently shot herself.<sup>105</sup> The narrator and Anna constitute two extremes: the hyper-protected child of an ethnically European family, and the callously disregarded child of non-white parents. The narrator's nursemaid is also linked to folk culture; it is because of her stories of the folk-hero Difunta Correa that the narrator's father gets rid of her—which he does by torturing her daughter. This authoritarian state, like the Nazi state to which it is explicitly linked in the text,<sup>106</sup> uses the rhetoric of reproductive futurism ("die Kinder sind unsere Zukunft"), while only supporting the lives of children who can embody the future envisioned by that state.

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 21, 79.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid. The narrator's adoptive father also links the two countries via "N.N.," at once referencing the *Nacht und Nebel* directive of the Nazis and the *desaparecidos*, who when buried were marked as *ningún nombre*, or N.N. (which Erpenbeck renders as "No Name"). See *ibid.*, 99.

## *The Role of Childhood in Erpenbeck's Fiction*

Each of Erpenbeck's protagonists possess differing and limited degrees of agency. As we have seen, both women have experienced emotional traumas, and their actions can easily be read as a form of regression and compulsive revisiting of the site of their respective traumas, namely childhood. This is particularly the case of the narrator in *Wörterbuch*, as evidenced by her use and reuse of other people's language.<sup>107</sup> Childhood was not a safe place for either woman, nor did either have a family who might be considered any kind of refuge. The old child's mother abused her, and the *Wörterbuch* narrator's family are not only the root of her trauma, but active participants in state violence. Furthermore, as we have seen, assuming the role of "child" entails a significant loss of personal freedom for both women. Because of the subject matter and the style in which each narrative is told, it is difficult to parse the extent to which these characters are making conscious choices. However, if we reframe the discussion and focus on the choices Erpenbeck makes as an author, a different set of questions arises. What does the focus on childhood enable for her fiction? What, for Erpenbeck, is the significance of the adult investment in an idealized notion of childhood?

In the case of *Geschichte vom alten Kind*, it is instructive to examine what the old child believes she will find at the *Heim*. She consciously maneuvers her teachers into giving up on her, indicating that she has no interest in the approval of adults. For most of the book, the other children treat her badly and play tricks on her, but even this treatment is a comfort to her. When one of the other children shoves her to the ground [*schubsen*], she feels

eine sehr große Beruhigung darüber, daß es [das Mädchen] diesen untersten Platz einnimmt, den niemand ihm streitig macht [...]. Die anderen wissen zwar, was das Leben ihnen schuldig ist: Das Leben ist ihnen die Freiheit schuldig, und die Freiheit ist

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<sup>107</sup> For a reading of both texts in relation to language and trauma, see Friedhelm Marx, "Geschlossene Gesellschaften, offene Texte. Jenny Erpenbecks *Geschichte vom alten Kind* und *Wörterbuch*," in Marx und Schöll, 97–110.

außerhalb dieser Anstalt – das Mädchen aber weiß, daß in Wahrheit die Freiheit das ist: nicht selber schubsen zu müssen, und diese Freiheit gibt es in der Anstalt, und nirgends sonst.<sup>108</sup>

As a “child,” she finds what she cannot as an adult: a limited, clearly navigable social world in which she can assume a defined, fixed position at the bottom of the hierarchy. This passage is one of the only glimpses we get into why she wants “diesen untersten Platz” – it allows her the freedom from treating others the way they treat her (“nicht selber schubsen zu müssen”). She masquerades as a child because it allows her the illusion of legibly-defined social and moral orders; it offers her the fantasy of freedom from complicity in the oppression of others. Read in the context of the GDR, her sense of freedom, along with her ability to forget everything that she learns, could be understood as a desire not to participate in a culture of surveillance; the orphanage becomes a site of retreat from the entanglements of adult society. One could also extend this understanding to the *Heim-as-GDR/Ostalgie*-allegory interpretation, in which the old child desires a return to the feeling of being cut off from the rest of the world unless she chooses otherwise (recall Erpenbeck’s description of the GDR: “das Einzige, was uns mit dieser großen, weiten Welt da draußen verband: die internationale Solidarität”).

But Erpenbeck complicates her protagonist’s ability to take her place at the bottom rung of the children’s social hierarchy. Though the other children treat her badly sometimes, for the most part they ostracize her, leaving her outside of the social order entirely. When she is finally acknowledged as one of them, it is because she assists a boy who has stolen money by concealing the evidence from a teacher. After this episode, she becomes a repository for other boys’ stolen items; her peers tolerate her because she is useful to them. But she refuses to understand that this is the reason for the change in their attitudes—she enjoys her peers’

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<sup>108</sup> Erpenbeck, *Geschichte vom alten Kind*, 25.

acknowledgement of her but cannot or will not see that the reason is her assistance in their rule breaking.

Furthermore, the old child finds that real children are far more complicated than she had anticipated. Getting to know them, for one, interrupts her “Kunst des Vergessens.” Whereas initially she has no conception of the other children as individuals, when they begin to accept her, she starts to remember their names and see them as specific personalities.<sup>109</sup> She also begins to connect cause and effect for the first time, even if on a limited basis. She is also confronted with her peers’ adolescence and budding sexuality, which physically disgusts her. She finds herself furthermore paralyzed by seemingly innocuous decisions, afraid of doing something wrong: “[das Mädchen] weiß nun auch, daß Hunderte von Möglichkeiten bestehen, etwas falsch zu machen. Dieses Wissen beraubt seine Bewegungen des dumpfen Schwunges, den sie bisher noch immer besessen hatten.”<sup>110</sup> Becoming a part of children’s society, even the lowest member of it, is conditional; aware that she is not really one of them, the old child also knows that her acceptance could be revoked as easily as it was given. The simplicity she craves from childhood does not exist.

In *Wörterbuch*, childhood is more akin to a gilded cage than a source of refuge. In some ways, the narrator’s adoptive father’s ideas about children and innocence echo the old child’s. Just as the old child is obsessed with her own “Reinheit,” so too does the narrator’s father emphasize that the narrator’s purity was the reason he wanted her. Like the old child, the narrator’s father overly concerned with keeping his daughter in a state of prolonged childhood; she imagines herself the “fruit” of her father rather than her mother, and she sits and sleeps in her

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 72-4.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 97.

father's lap at an age most would deem inappropriate. However, while there are certainly undercurrents of sexuality and stunted sexual development throughout *Wörterbuch*, the narrator's father most explicitly connects her purity to language. Describing the first time he saw her (while torturing her parents), he says: "Du warst absolut rein. [...] Drei, vier Worte vielleicht. Aber sonst nichts."<sup>111</sup> He sees her as a blank slate, untainted by her biological parents' political leanings; this "blankness" is signified by her inability to speak, save for a few words.

It is this prelapsarian state of blankness that the narrator spends the book trying to access—the time before her experience of the world was tainted by her adoptive father (to some extent, she shares or has internalized his belief in an original purity). She opens her story by recalling what the reader will later realize are those few words she knew before she was taken from her parents:

Vater und Mutter. Ball. Auto. Das vielleicht die einzigen Wörter, die heil waren, als ich sie lernte. Und auch die dann verkehrt, aus mir gerissen und andersherum wieder eingesetzt, das Gegenteil von Ball wieder Ball, von Vater und Mutter Vater und Mutter. [...] Alle anderen Worte von vornherein mit der Hälfte Schweigen als Bleigewicht an den Füßen, so wie der Mond seine dunkle Seite mit sich herumschleppt, sogar wenn er voll ist. Aber der kreist immerhin. Für mich standen die Worte fest, aber jetzt laß ich sie los, und wenn es nicht anders geht, schneide ich den einen oder anderen Fuß lieber mit ab.<sup>112</sup>

In telling her story and inhabiting the guise of the child/childish narrator, she seeks to return to a place in which language might be "heil" rather than "verkehrt." But nearly every word has come to be associated with her adoptive parents and the life she has shared with them. At the end of the book, words appear to contain their complete opposite. The opposite of "Vater" and "Mutter"—'ur-words' learned from, and also referring to, her real parents—are "Vater" and "Mutter," her adoptive parents; the latter fill the same role and inhabit the same appellations, but destroyed her

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<sup>111</sup> Erpenbeck, *Wörterbuch*, 102.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.



first mother and father in order to do so. The narrator's story is an attempt to cut the tainted words loose ("jetzt laß ich sie los"). But in telling the story, it becomes clear that tainted language is all she has. She narrates through repeated words and phrases, which take on new meaning as the story progresses ("Mein Vater kennt sich mit den Strömungen aus"). Through this strategy of repetition, Erpenbeck shows the reader just how impossible this task is: the protagonist both narrates and speaks almost entirely in reported speech and repeated phrases, reflecting the impossibility of the narrator's hopes for a pure language.<sup>113</sup> The repetitions also point towards the ways authoritarian societies degrade language and the meaning of words in order to render citizens helpless and erode possibilities of resistance.

At the end of *Wörterbuch*, the people who arrest her adoptive parents tell the narrator she has been liberated [*befreit*], a statement she takes with irony. To be "liberated," all experiences of her adoptive family would need to be excised from her psyche—something that would necessitate the erasure of nearly all of her memories and experiences with the world. "Sôse gelîmida sîn. Ich sei nun befreit," she thinks.<sup>114</sup> "Sôse gelîmida sîn" is an excerpt from a medieval Germanic text, the Second Merseburg Incantation. The allusion is an odd choice, given the book's Latin American setting, and does not play a role in the narrative itself. The quotation first appears in the book's epigraph, which contains two lines from the Second Incantation, along with a modern German translation: "Bein zu Beine, Blut zu Blute, / Glied zu Gliedern, so seien sie fest aneinandergefügt."<sup>115</sup> ("Sôse gelîmida sîn" corresponds to the last clause of the incantation.) Using this ancient text connects the narrator with a distant but unknown lineage.

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<sup>113</sup> Cf. the association of the child with a "pure point of origin," in Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan, or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1984), introduction. See also below.

<sup>114</sup> Erpenbeck, *Wörterbuch*, 104.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, n.p.

The quotation undercuts the news of her supposed liberation by reiterating that she is inextricably tied to her adoptive parents and their heritage. Her skepticism of her liberation is further emphasized by her use of the subjunctive (“Ich sei nun befreit”) to relay the quotation to the reader, whereas the words of most people in her life are conveyed directly to the reader without her mediation (her father, for example, spends nearly a dozen pages talking about his crimes in direct speech).

At the end of her story, the narrator is unable to let go of the tainted words, as she had initially set out to do. Although she claimed she would “den Fuß lieber mit ab[schneiden],” she finds herself, as the epigraph says, bound “Glied zu Gliedern” to her adoptive parents. In the book’s final pages, narrated in the third person, she almost never speaks. When she does, it is to agree with her adoptive father, whom she visits in prison. There is no ability to shed the “Bleigewicht,” no chance of a language that is “heil.” Erpenbeck denies both of her protagonists the refuge they seek. In her fiction, childhood is not an idyllic state, nor is it a place to which one can return. Instead, she problematizes the adult idealization of childhood and renders it unsettling and uncanny, emphasizing the futility of attempting to recoup a sense of original innocence.

## **Conclusion**

Erpenbeck’s fiction emphasizes strangeness of adult conceptions of children through an aesthetic of exaggeration and the grotesque. The more adults attempt to enact what they perceive to be generically “childlike” behavior or speech, the more unsettling they become. The old child desires an idealized, unremarkable form of childhood; formally, this desire is mirrored in the narrator’s withholding of much of the girl’s inner life. Just as she is frustrated in her desire for a normative childhood, so too is the reader denied answers about who the girl is. Although

*Wörterbuch* appears to give a more interior picture of its protagonist, the narrator's thoughts are constituted by the words and language of others. In both cases, Erpenbeck is less interested in creating a psychologically realistic portrait than she is in heightening the reader's discomfort and thinking through the implications of normative constructions of children and childhood.

The adults in Erpenbeck's fiction associate children with a kind of ahistorical version of language and culture. This fantasy of the child as *tabula rasa* is a long-standing trope of adults' writing about children, dating back to Enlightenment-era philosophies of reason and language. Jaqueline Rose identifies Locke and Rousseau as promoting "a philosophy which sets up the child as a pure point of origin in relation to language, sexuality and the state."<sup>116</sup> Their ideas, which Rose argues are still evident in writing about children (she specifically addresses the issue of children's fiction, but her observations apply to Erpenbeck's fiction equally well), link the idea of children's innocence with "a primary state of language and/or culture in a close and mutually dependent relation."<sup>117</sup>

Erpenbeck's fiction interrogates and critiques these lingering ideas about children and childhood. Both the old child and the narrator of *Wörterbuch* covet an erasure of the past when they reinhabit childhood. The old child imagines childhood not as a state of development and formation, but as a static state of being characterized by innocence and a lack of history, personal or otherwise ("ein unbeschriebenes Blatt"). *Wörterbuch*'s narrator searches fruitlessly for an untainted language, inheriting that idea in part from her adoptive father and his obsession with her purity. Erpenbeck reveals how children are constructed as not being linguistically or culturally bound to a specific context, even though their education and upbringing (like the

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<sup>116</sup> Rose, 8.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 9.

communally-focused education the old child receives at the *Kinderheim*, or the nationalistic instruction received by the narrator of *Wörterbuch*) are clearly inflected by cultural and national context.

Erpenbeck's texts examine the ways in which adults want children to exist in a way that suspends the passage of time and 'protects' them from politics, history, complicity, and moral ambiguity. The child, in their minds, is somehow outside of time as they understand it, and ignorant of history as they have experienced it. Yet in both cases, Erpenbeck makes clear that their desires are out of step with lives of actual children, and that they oversimplify the lived experience of childhood.

## Conclusion

When considering scholarship on the child, it is illuminating to consider the texts used to lay the foundations of theory. Jacqueline Rose considers the children's classic, *Peter Pan*, and demonstrates how J.M. Barrie's story was, in fact, intended for adult audiences.<sup>1</sup> In doing so, she demonstrates the extent to which children's literature is shaped by and for adult desires. Similarly, Maria Tatar examines fairy tales—now popularly considered to be for children—and traces their pre-Grimms origins in folklore and oral storytelling; these, too, originated as stories told by and for adults (often to pass time while laboring), and were later reshaped and repackaged as children's stories.<sup>2</sup> Both Rose and Tatar highlight the values, lessons, and desires adults project onto children through literature and criticism. Though Lee Edelman is not a scholar of children's literature or culture, his work, too, belongs to the growing body of scholarship examining the socio-cultural construction of the child, and how adult fantasies about “the Child” (in the abstract) come to shape moral and political frameworks. In *No Future*, Edelman primarily considers the films of Alfred Hitchcock, as well as P.D. James' *Children of Men* (1992), in order to demonstrate how the Child is used to regulate who may participate in political discourse. Their readings reveal much about how adults construct and use the child for their own ends, but, significantly, none of these texts deal in an extended way with the actual experience of childhood. Their focus on contemporary and historical discursive practices

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<sup>1</sup> See Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan, or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1984), especially chapters three and four.

<sup>2</sup> See Maria Tatar, *Off with Their Heads!: Fairy Tales and the Culture of Childhood* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), especially introduction and chapters one and two.

necessarily displaces the experiences of actual children, rendering them peripheral (Rose and Tatar) or non-existent (Edelman).<sup>3</sup>

This dissertation has taken as its focus stories that not only thematize the discursive practices surrounding the child, but also consider the lived experience of children, particularly girls. This is one of the reasons that the structural framework of *The Queer Child* has proven productive for this study: Kathryn Bond Stockton provides an analytical model that brings historical and theoretical insights to texts that are actually about the experience of queer or non-normative childhoods. Stockton reads narratives of childhood and youth against the grain, searching in them for moments of “sideways growth,” in which queer children delay or seek alternatives to a heteronormative adulthood.<sup>4</sup> In doing so, she theorizes the child using the texts that explore their experiences, rather than texts that are simply about or contain children, allowing them to become more than foils for adult desires.

Another limitation of the field lies in the fact that it considers almost exclusively source material from Anglo-American traditions. (When literary and cultural scholarship on childhood draws on German-language texts, it almost invariably uses fairy tales.) As we have seen, the material it examines also tends to replicate a certain kind of child: innocent, with little to no responsibility, agency, or sense of the larger world (except, as noted, for Stockton). The children of these texts in fact resemble the legal construction of the child as a body whose growth needs to be managed and delayed, requiring protections for his or her own good.<sup>5</sup> Yet approaching

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Henry Jenkins on the displacement of the child from scholarship. Henry Jenkins, “Introduction: Childhood Innocence and Other Modern Myths,” in *The Children’s Culture Reader*, ed. Henry Jenkins (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 23 - 30.

<sup>4</sup> See Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), especially introduction.

<sup>5</sup> See *ibid.*, 33-46.

texts that only replicate specific cultural narratives, as well as pervasive ideas about children's innocence, is ultimately limiting, as it overlooks texts that are already actively engaged with, and critical of, the conventions associated with childhood.

This dissertation has examined the writings of Christa Wolf, Herta Müller, and Jenny Erpenbeck in order to introduce new historical contexts and new modes of representation to its critical repertoire to scholarship on the child. Considering texts about children from the Eastern Bloc enables us to see some of the cultural assumptions underlying current theoretical paradigms. Current scholarship on the discursive construction of childhood often relies on a common historical narrative, which traces the changing economic status of the child from Victorian era to the mid-twentieth century, during which time children went from “valuable” (as workers) to “priceless” (their value exceeding economic considerations, and therefore requiring protections from predatory labor practices) to being consumers in their own right.<sup>6</sup> In this narrative, children primarily function as objects: the objects of capitalist exploitation, the objects of moral and charitable campaigns, and finally the objects of capitalist exploitation again, this time via marketing practices. What little agency youth have in this narrative primarily comes primarily from their ability to purchase goods and participate in consumer culture.<sup>7</sup>

Usually assumed to be “innocent” or ignorant of politics, the works of Wolf, Müller, and Erpenbeck critically examine the position of the child in the authoritarian state. Under the regimes they describe, the state interpellates children as political subjects in order to perpetuate and sustain its power into the future. In addition to using the child as a symbol of futurity,

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<sup>6</sup> See Viviana A. Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> When children are represented as having agency, they often belong to the trope of the “evil child,” in which the child's actions and power are an object of fear. See Dominic Lennard, *Bad Seeds and Holy Terrors: The Child Villains of Horror Film* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014).

authoritarian regimes intervene into the structure of the nuclear family in order to make the child loyal to the state before all others. As we have seen, this move gives children, who often do not comprehend the long-term consequences of their actions, more power than they would normally have; it also, at times, renders them dangerous to the adults around them, turning children into an object of fear. These authors show how authoritarian regimes have attempted to ensure their own futurity through indoctrination and normalization: children grow up knowing no other way of life, and learn that their survival depends on loyalty to the state.

As a result, these authors have searched for ways to depict the psychological experience of growing up in a repressive society while simultaneously avoiding the representational tropes used by the regimes in question. Their work creates space for both a critical examination of the myriad of factors that contribute to the social construction of childhood on the one hand, and an empathetic rendering of the psychological and social burdens children face on the other. This dissertation argues that an analysis of their work can therefore address some important gaps in the scholarly literature on childhood. Wolf, Müller, and Erpenbeck do not displace the child, but center her; they use her experience to show how the child has been exploited to the detriment of both adults and children, without sacrificing an understanding of the child as a human being. Furthermore, their focus on girlhood highlights experiences that have often been overlooked in both scholarship on the child, as well as in narratives of war, violence, and political repression.

None of these authors posit, as Rose argues that children's literature problematically does, that they have some kind of unmediated access to the child.<sup>8</sup> On the contrary, all three create a sense of distance from childhood by using only adult narrators. Wolf and Erpenbeck explicitly thematize the extent to which childhood is irretrievable to the adult self. While

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<sup>8</sup> Rose, 8-9.



Müller's collage-like aesthetic in "Niederungen" approximates the way a child thinks, she too is clear that her narrator is not a child, and that the story has been shaped by an adult consciousness.

Nor do these writers approach childhood with anything like nostalgia: the children depicted in these texts come of age in repressive societies, under authoritarian states. This experience leaves them unable to look back fondly on childhood without also experiencing feelings of guilt and shame. For these children, the development of the self is inextricably entangled with learning to survive under unusually restrictive circumstances. Whereas much scholarship on the child focuses on how politics coopts the child to regulate adult behavior, these texts bear witness to one of authoritarianism's most insidious mechanisms: namely, the way authoritarian states attempt to intervene into the child's developmental process. Wolf in particular explores the everyday experience of totalitarianism: for her, political life was not a distant, faraway thing, but something she encountered daily, at school, in books, in children's songs and games, even in the way she greeted people. Nazism's reach extended so far that, years later, the adult Wolf found that the only way she could write about her childhood was to literally split the ego of her narrator in an attempt to parse what parts of her were the result of normative development, and what parts were created by the political context of her upbringing. For Müller, growing up in a small village dominated by ethnocentrism required that she conform in order to have any kind of social existence; later, when she encountered the Romanian Communist state more directly, she found it to be a logical extension of what she already knew. In *Wörterbuch*, Erpenbeck's narrator discovers that the military *junta* has stolen not only her childhood, but even the words she uses to describe her reality; unable to cope with her tainted language, she eventually stops speaking, except to echo the words of her captors.

In these texts, the child is a kind of lynchpin. She illustrates how authoritarianism insinuates itself into a person's innermost psyche. At the same time, she serves as a kind of metaphor for the relationship between the state and its citizens. The state uses the pretext of protecting its citizens, like children, to justify restricting and eliminating their freedoms. In addition to policing them, it trains citizens to self-police and self-censor as a means of avoiding the violence associated with the punishment of transgression.

Yet even though the child can be understood metaphorically, the texts also betray varying levels of discomfort with positioning the child as a metaphor. All three authors draw attention to the ways repressive governments have coopted the figure of the child for their own ends, not only in Europe, but in Latin America as well. As a result, these authors attempt to create different aesthetic strategies in order to avoid replicating the tropes and conventions used by the authoritarian regimes they describe.<sup>9</sup> For Wolf, this means interweaving an extremely self-conscious metacommentary throughout her memories, calling into question what she knows and what she has chosen to forget. Müller focuses on concrete detail and image, eschewing a narration that might artificially impose a larger agenda onto her fiction. Erpenbeck writes in an almost fable-like style, blending realism with elements of the fantastical and Kafkaesque. In doing so, all three problematize the universalization of the child, refusing to make the child into a mere screen for the reader's projection or an embodiment of a distant future.

Like the discursive construction of the child identified in scholarship, the authoritarian states described in the works of Wolf, Müller, and Erpenbeck portrayed the child as a precious

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<sup>9</sup> Their dilemma is reminiscent of the position West German artists found themselves in when they sought to memorialize Nazi atrocities after the war: they were tasked with creating monuments, a form that had also been used by the Nazi regime for nationalistic ends. As a result, they developed aesthetic strategies that James Young has described as "counter-monumental." See James E Young, "The Counter-Monument: Memory Against Itself in Germany Today," *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 2 (Winter 1992): 267–96.

symbol of futurity. These regimes depict the child as, without an individual identity or inner life; that idealized child feels only loyalty to and love for the state. Despite these governments' lip service to the importance of family, these states actively intervene in nuclear families with the aim of inserting themselves as father of the nation's children. Wolf depicts the horrifying consequences of what happens when a child takes this imperative seriously, as he has been trained to do his whole life: in *Kindheitsmuster*, Horst Binder, a boy fanatically obsessed with Hitler, murders his family and then commits suicide when the Nazis' defeat in the Second World War is immanent. Müller writes extensively about the impact of Nicolae Ceaușescu's draconian pro-natalist policies on both women and children. Many women were compelled to carry unwanted pregnancies to term, or died seeking abortions; orphanages overflowed with unwanted children, who grew up only knowing the dictator as their father. And Erpenbeck's *Wörterbuch* draws on the practices of the Argentine military *junta*, which kidnapped the children of political prisoners and gave them to members of the government elite to raise as their own. Erpenbeck's narrator is devastated by the trauma of having witnessed her biological parents' murder at the hands of her adoptive father, to the point where she can barely speak. Having experienced these states' attempts to construct images of ahistorical children in whose name many are persecuted, these authors demonstrate how political and social contexts indelibly shape children's experiences, even when those children are not the state's direct victims, but its direct or indirect beneficiaries.

Wolf, Müller, and Erpenbeck emphasize the child's vulnerability, but their approach differs from the tropes normally associated with the child. Scholarship describes how the child is often constructed as needing to be protected (specifically from sexuality or economic knowledge), implicitly or explicitly necessitating the intervention of an authority on their behalf.

In the texts discussed here, it is primarily the state that renders children vulnerable. Wolf also flips this equation and demonstrates how authoritarianism renders children a threat to adults: not understanding the consequences of their actions, children are taught that their first loyalty is to the state and are encouraged to denounce even their parents. Furthermore, the child's lack of knowledge (ignorance) also estranges them from the adults around them. Müller's "Niederungen" shows that the taboos surrounding ethnic Germans' experiences in Soviet labor camps estranges the child-protagonist from her mother. The two are unable to understand one another; what seems to the young girl like her mother's cruelty in fact stems from the older woman's experience of starvation.

While the child is vulnerable because of her relative powerlessness, the authors do not render children as passive victims. They look for the ways in which children manage to find some small amount of agency. Herta Müller describes this as "Untertanendenken," figuring out how to appear to conform even when she did not believe in what she was saying. Erpenbeck describes a similar phenomenon in *Geschichte vom alten Kind*, showing how the old child is able to manipulate adults into believing that she is unteachable.

At the same time, the possibility of agency is a double-edged sword, for it raises the question of whether children can be implicated in the crimes of the society they are growing into. Wolf is especially haunted by the question of the extent of her own responsibility, even though she was a child under the Third Reich. Müller likewise explores how dire material circumstances compel children to, if not become complicit, then grow to become complicit in order to survive. The narrator of Erpenbeck's *Wörterbuch* is haunted by ghosts, indicating her awareness of her adoptive father's crimes, suggesting the psychic burden this has placed on her. Though scholarship often describes narrative in which the child is used to establish moral clarity, in these

texts, the child instead comes to demonstrate the limits of our ability to definitively conceive of and arbitrate morality, complicity, and culpability.

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