

UC Berkeley

TRANSIT

Title

Contested Memory and Narrative within GDR-Polish Intercultural Landscapes: Ursula Höntsch's *Wir Flüchtlingskinder* (1985) and *Wir sind keine Kinder mehr* (1990)

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2m4950cj>

Journal

TRANSIT, 14(1)

Author

Conacher, Jean

Publication Date

2024

DOI

10.5070/T714162197

Copyright Information

Copyright 2024 by the author(s). This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Contested Memory and Narrative within GDR-Polish Intercultural Landscapes: Ursula Höntsch's *Wir Flüchtlingskinder* (1985) and *Wir sind keine Kinder mehr* (1990) *TRANSIT* vol. 14, no. 1

Jean Conacher

Introduction

Europe's present has always been shaped and defined by the moving political and cultural borders of its past. Any consideration of its borderlands as intercultural landscapes, particularly through the lens of literary works, challenges us to engage more deeply with the complex nature of such liminal spaces and to explore the potential tensions between geopolitical and cultural perceptions of the borders within, across, and around which individuals and communities live and move. For not only borders can shift; the political and socio-cultural changes wrought by border realignment often lead to population movement, forced or otherwise. In 2009, Noel Parker and Nick Vaughan-Williams rejected borders as simple declarative "lines in the sand." By 2012, in further developing their concept of Critical Border Studies, they conceived "the border" as existing only "in a constant state of becoming" (728), constituting "memories of past and present violences etched into social landscapes" (731). This "becoming" is rendered more complex by the recognition that memory is never fixed but dynamic and multidimensional and that "remembering" is best regarded "as an active engagement with the past, as performative rather than as reproductive" (Erll and Rigney 2).

The relationship between Germany and its neighbors through the twentieth century reinforces this perspective, as, at each stage, competing narratives based on experience and political agenda have shaped both historical events and the individual and collective memories of these events. Two wars saw borders repeatedly redrawn, defended, and transgressed. World War II left Europe craving peace and stability, with a divided Germany becoming the political and ideological borderland of two opposing world orders. The Soviet Union's muted response to unrest among its political partners in the late 1980s demonstrated a marked contrast to previous decades and a clear recognition by its new leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, that solutions to socio-political crises must be found through consensus within national boundaries. This approach helped open the path to German reunification in 1990, an event that heralded a significant redrawing of national and supranational borders, as the reach of the European Union stretched eastwards.

The rapid dissolution of the German-German border and the largely peaceful accession of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) to the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) were broadly accepted domestically at the time, even though major issues around

societal inequality remain a challenge decades later. As human constructs held in place only by consensus and secured by mutual accord, national borders remain ever fragile and open to political weaponization. In times of stability, they may fade into the background of human consciousness, only to be rendered visible by conflict and disharmony. Little wonder they can prove nothing more than arbitrary markings on shifting ground.

The German-Polish borderlands offer a particularly rich example of how geopolitical and cultural perceptions of liminal spaces are intertwined. The often ideological and ethnic dimensions of community and conflict, coupled with the fluidity of the political borders within that area, favors focused and historically contextualized studies. Consequently, I confine my current discussion primarily to the years from 1940 to 1985, a timespan covering the events described in *Wir Flüchtlingskinder* (1985) and *Wir sind keine Kinder mehr* (1990), two interlinked novels by the GDR/East German author Ursula Höntsch.¹ As her own lived experience in the German-Polish borderlands of the time shaped her writing, so “‘literary landscapes’ ... continually shape mindscapes and the perceptual images of the observer” (Newman and Paasi 197). The fictionalized borderlands of Höntsch’s novels thus encourage the reader to reflect upon and reimagine the actual geographical and cultural space from which her creative works emerge. Analyzing literature set within borderlands deepens our understanding of the cultural significance of borders *per se*, for such works both portray “performativity of the border, the ways that borders are given meaning through practices” (Salter 738) and potentially represent an act of border performativity in themselves.

Höntsch’s novels follow the life of Marianne Hönow from her childhood in war-time Silesia to her work as a teacher in the GDR. This successful career trajectory is typical of the socialist *Bildungsroman* favored by GDR cultural authorities in the 1950s *Aufbau* period, during which writers were officially tasked with helping build a socialist German state through their literary works. In later decades, as I have argued elsewhere, writers such as Höntsch adapt this form “to engage in a conscious critique of educational, cultural and societal developments” (Conacher 6). Marianne’s positive societal trajectory masks a lifetime profoundly impacted by changing geopolitical borders and by unresolved cultural borders manifested through language choices and the performance of identity. Höntsch’s work reveals how conflicting narratives evolving from, and shaping, contested memories of common experience inform the actions and attitudes of states and individuals across political and cultural borders. Both the author’s biography and her two novels can be understood within the framework of Jan Assmann’s work on narrative and collective memory and Aleida Assmann’s examination of therapeutic forgetting. In what follows, I trace how Höntsch maps the geopolitical reshaping of the German-Polish borderlands over the period in which her novels are set. I then discuss how the use of language and explorations of identity in these works reflect changing understandings of this cultural space. In doing so, I will argue that these novels offer insights into the commonalities and tensions between geopolitical and cultural interpretations of the German-Polish borderlands and that, given developments in the late 1980s, they represent a significant example of Critical Border Studies in their own right.

¹ The author published the first of these novels under the name “Höntsch-Harendt,” but, as she prefers the shorter form for most of her other publications, I have used this throughout here.

Literature as a Study of Memory-Making

Socio-political and intercultural fluidities inevitably lead to ambiguities of historical narrative and memory-making. In discussing the collective memory of past events, Jan Assmann distinguishes between cultural and communicative memory. Cultural memory generates the “grand narrative” critiqued by Michel Foucault (153) and Jean-François Lyotard (37). Assmann considers it a societally or institutionally established memory reinforced by cultural texts, rites, and monuments. He contrasts this with communicative memory that is co-constructed within a group, or between individuals, offering different perspectives on the remembered even when relying on shared experiences (12).

Ursula Höntsch’s own biography is inextricably shaped by the German-Polish borderlands of the twentieth century. Born in 1934 in Frankenstein, Lower Silesia (now Ząbkowice Śląskie), Höntsch fled westwards with her mother in the final months of the war. Her parents and sister re-established contact in the Soviet Occupation Zone and made their home in the GDR. Höntsch died in Berlin in February 2000 at the age of 65. Both novels discussed here exemplify the beginnings of a more open engagement in the GDR with the German experience of mass expulsion sanctioned by the Potsdam Agreement of August 1, 1945, with *Wir Flüchtlingskinder* representing a caesura for many in the treatment of this theme.² The novels contribute also to a growing trend within GDR literature of the 1980s, whereby writers increasingly reject the dominant national narratives reinforcing the GDR’s founding myths of anti-fascism and the birth of a socialist society on German soil. In challenging this singularly positive cultural memory, writers began looking back in particular to the Aufbau period of the 1950s to find the roots of contemporary societal malaise (Conacher 205).

In 1985, the year Gorbachev came to power in Moscow, Höntsch published *Wir Flüchtlingskinder*, an autobiographical novel based closely on her own childhood experiences up to the summer of 1950, in the years just before the Aufbau period officially began. This relatively standard first-person narrative is sprinkled with diary excerpts, remembered political jokes and children’s songs, official legal documentation, and newspaper copy. Only occasional comments are made by the present-day narrator; mostly, it is her childhood self who dominates. Höntsch’s second novel, *Wir sind keine Kinder mehr* (1990), unexpectedly proved to be one of the last works subject to the GDR’s licensing procedures. It picks up on the experiences of Marianne Hönow, the protagonist-narrator who fled Silesia as a child in the first novel. From the perspective of 1985, Marianne, now a teacher in the GDR, reflects on her eight-year correspondence and friendship with Wanda, a young Polish student of German living in Marianne’s old hometown of Liegnitz/Legnica³ and pursuing the same career path.

The dates of Marianne and Wanda’s interaction, between June 1953 and August 1961, are historically and politically significant in terms of German-German relations. The former references the Workers’ Uprising of 17 June 1953, which the GDR government

² Udo Grasshoff (456, fn.77) reaffirms Andreas Kossert’s focus on the innovative use of dialect and the degree of reader response to the novel’s publication. Bill Niven highlights the juxtaposition of official discourse and private interpretation (153).

³ In alluding to the town in my discussions, I use these designations individually, in line with the historical naming of the period, or in combination, where Marianne’s interchangeable usage indicates a less fixed sense of, and ambiguous affinity to, place in her reflections on her past.

dismissed as the result of cross-border interference by West German agitators; the latter alludes to the construction of the Berlin Wall, the ultimate manifestation in twentieth-century Europe of border and division. The second novel is markedly more sophisticated than Höntsch's first and makes greater demands on the reader. Höntsch adopts a more experimental form, mixing different time-levels and narrative positions in a combination of letters, first-person narrative exposition, and *post hoc* reflective commentary. At its center lie tensions in the young women's growing friendship that are only ultimately resolved by critical engagement on both sides.

This more intricate narrative form, therefore, reflects the growing complexity of Marianne's engagement with the borderlands portrayed. Höntsch's first work constitutes a form of grand narrative, depicting events reported partly through public announcements but mediated primarily, and in an increasingly nuanced way, through Marianne's voice. This contrasts starkly with the polyphonic structure of her second novel that reflects a multidimensional communicative memory of the borderland experience being constructed together by different actors.

Defining and Shaping the Borderlands

Over many centuries, German- and Polish-speaking communities have inhabited expansive cultural borderlands stretching downwards from the southern Baltic coast across frequently shifting political lines. The invasion of Poland by Hitler's forces in 1939 that triggered the official outbreak of WWII was heralded in Germany as the retrieval of lands lost unfairly under the Versailles Treaty in 1918, while Nazi propaganda demanded the so-called Volksdeutschen be defended against personal attacks from the broader Polish population (Bergen). Lower Silesia, the setting for the early chapters of *Wir Flüchtlingskinder* and an important reference point throughout both novels, remained part of Germany after 1918. Despite original plans to leave its national allegiance unchanged, Lower Silesia was transferred to Poland after WWII, bounded in the west by the course of two rivers to form the Oder-Neisse line. This topologically convenient but politically uneasy border re-shaped historical German-Polish relations in the aftermath of the Second World War. It equally disavowed and disrupted the complex intercultural relationship between the newly constituted socialist brother states of the People's Republic of Poland and the German Democratic Republic, which played out across the *Friedensgrenze*, as it was officially termed within the newly developing Eastern Bloc. With the stroke of a pen, century-old enemies were now to become "brothers"; old suspicions were to be set aside, and stories of loss and forced migration silenced.

In reality, the impact of this "peace border" stretched well beyond the new Eastern Bloc allies on either side. Diverging ideological stances towards the borderlands east of the Oder-Neisse line contributed to ongoing German-German tensions in the decades following the re-emergence of the Polish state. The *Bund der Heimatvertriebenen* provided an organized voice in the Federal Republic for the rights of those portrayed as forced from their homes under Allied diktat, while the GDR's official term *Umsiedler* promoted the narrative that those who left were willing agents of their own rehoming. Although the GDR and Poland formally recognized their common border as early as 1950, it would take until 1990 for this international border to be fully ratified as part of the negotiated arrangements for German reunification.

The multiple lenses through which these borderlands are viewed prove to be a feature of Höntsch's novels. Excerpts from ten-year-old Marianne's diary, carried with her as she leaves Silesia, or remnants of past conversations in *Wir Flüchtlingskinder* (henceforth *WF*), and the letters exchanged with her Polish pen-pal from her last school year onwards in *Wir sind keine Kinder mehr* (*WK*) allow the voice of the younger generation to emerge and challenge the more established views of older generations. This "commitment to perspective" (Niven 153) exposes how narratives of cultural geography and nation are exploited in the socialization of new citizens, with the generational novel remaining an important tool to revisit remembered events (Mevisen).

Reflecting the discourse of autumn 1944, Marianne talks easily, almost detachedly, of the border space of East Prussia and recalls local newspaper reports of the crossing by Soviet troops of the German border in East Prussia.⁴ As the battlefield comes ever closer, Marianne's mental map of her locale becomes sharper as she details more specifically the areas from which refugees arrive, and she comes to appreciate more clearly Liegnitz's peripheral positioning in relation to Germany, as the new arrivals are moved on further into the inner depths of the *Reich*.⁵

Weeks later, Marianne imbibes the official narrative that only the incursions of the Bolshevik armies into the eastern German districts force her family westwards to find safety.⁶ When she returns briefly to Liegnitz four months later, it is still home, despite indications, as her mother seeks to buy their train tickets, that the geopolitical landscape has changed: "Tickets? Madame, where do you think you are? A train to Silesia? Doesn't exist anymore. There is still a train leaving for Poland today, but only for Poles."⁷ She is forced to walk for weeks with her family to get home, but even in her own mind crossing the last river brings them only "into Silesian space" rather than to a more concrete location.⁸

Undoubtedly both the rail employee's comment and Marianne's own inner monologue represent linguistic "borderwork" where we see "the efforts of ordinary people leading to the construction, dismantling, or shifting of borders" (Rumford 97). The establishment of their new geopolitical reality is not just dependent on political decree, but also on its acceptance by individuals and communities. Initially, however, Marianne's diary entries from this first return visit reveal little reflection on the profound impact of the changes she sees: "There are only a few Germans left in Liegnitz, which is now called Lignice because now Poles live here."⁹ The name change marks a complex change in national allegiances and political realities of which she seems largely unaware.

Despite the presence of Nazi infrastructures and NSDAP ideologues, the Liegnitz in which Marianne grows up is initially framed as a mostly peaceful, neutral space, relatively untouched by war and ethnic division. While this outlook may be grounded in what Aleida Assmann considers a collectively agreed community silencing of historical discord to ensure societal harmony (22), it also underlines the naivety of Höntsch's child

⁴ "Grenzraum Ostpreußen" (*WF* 11); "die deutsche Grenze in Ostpreußen" (*WF* 11).

⁵ "weiter ins Innere des Reiches" (*WF* 57).

⁶ "der Einbruch der bolschewistischen Armeen in die ostdeutschen Gauen" (*WF* 69).

⁷ "Fahrkarten? Gute Frau, wo leben Sie denn! Ein Zug nach Schlesien? Gibt's nicht mehr. Ein Zug nach Polen fährt heute noch ab, aber nur für Polen" (*WF* 108).

⁸ "ins Schlesische" (*WF* 110).

⁹ "Es sind nur noch wenige Deutsche in Liegnitz, das jetzt Lignice heißt, weil jetzt Polen hier leben" (*WF* 107)

protagonist. Marianne's unquestioning association of Liegnitz with her German national identity and her lack of awareness of socio-economic and cultural divisions within the wider community are disrupted only later by the voices of other children. This is a device Höntsch exploits repeatedly to demonstrate how national narratives are established through deep, diachronic socialization processes. On leaving Liegnitz, Marianne travels with her family to Emmendorf, a small village in Saxony, where she and the other refugee children are attacked by their peers, fellow Germans, as "Pollacken" (*WF* 96), a derogatory label they have undoubtedly picked up from adults around them. During a brief return to Liegnitz/Legnica, "we Germans," as she now characterizes her community, are subject to evening curfews and decried as "fascist" by children from the now dominant Polish community.¹⁰

Similarly, geopolitical labels underline the contested nature of the area east of the Oder-Neisse line, and Höntsch's usage mirrors observations in historical studies of the time (cf. Polak-Springer 6–9). The generation to which Marianne's parents belong recognizes only a lost homeland in the Allied Powers' designation of "the previously German areas."¹¹ In contrast, Polish politicians celebrate the same geographical locale as "recovered territory", the postwar response to the unjust historical "eastern expansion and Germanization process" condemned retrospectively by Marianne's new teacher in the GDR.¹² For Marianne herself, these homelands gradually fade to a distant memory. They become the landscape of a past, almost forgotten, life only reawakened for her in Höntsch's second novel by a school pen-pal project offering the chance to write to fellow pupils "in other countries to the east."¹³ Over the years, she has adopted the official GDR terminology for her birthplace, calling it "formerly Silesian, now the People's Republic of Poland."¹⁴ Her pen pal, Wanda, who herself has been moved westwards with her family as part of an official "repatriation" policy under the Potsdam Agreement, in contrast rejects the official Polish labels given to her new home as "our original homeland ... our 'ancestral mother country'" and acknowledges she often still feels dislocated, "abroad, as if in a foreign place."¹⁵ Very soon, however, she declares, "This is now our country, the German days are now over here forever."¹⁶ The popular consensus that any remaining Germans must now assimilate does little more than reverse the earlier ethnic dynamics.

This perpetual cycle of othering and belonging reflects not just the changing geopolitical situation, but also a re-evaluation of Marianne's initial narrative of societal harmony in Liegnitz, not least during her temporary return there in June 1945. When her mother reveals that only three women from a local Polish Jewish family, the Sikorskis, have survived the war, this forces Marianne to acknowledge the realities of life in Liegnitz for the Polish minority even before Hitler comes to power. From Prussian times onward, the Sikorski family had remained proud of their heritage, despite being denied Polish-

¹⁰ "Wir Deutschen"; "Faschist" (*WF* 107).

¹¹ "die früheren deutschen Gebiete östlich der Linie" (*WF* 139).

¹² "das Territorium der Wiedergewonnenen Gebiete" (*WF* 137); "Ostexpansion und Germanisierung" (*WF* 220).

¹³ "im östlichen Ausland" (*WK* 11).

¹⁴ "ehemals Schlesien, jetzt Volksrepublik Polen" (*WK* 12).

¹⁵ "unsere Urheimat.... unser 'angestammtes Mutterland'" (*WK* 17); "im Ausland, wie in der Fremde" (*WK* 18).

¹⁶ "Das ist jetzt unser Land, die deutschen Zeiten sind hier für immer vorbei" (*WK* 53).

medium schooling for generations. Societal pressure leads them to confine their use of Polish and their traditional customs to the private sphere of family or close Polish and German friends. The fate of the Sikorskis, including the almost complete annihilation of their family in Nazi camps, clearly represents that of the wider Polish community of Marianne's birthplace as victims of Hitler's ideological quest for more national living space (*Lebensraum*). It exemplifies, too, that borders "are not necessarily seen as borders by all concerned, or in the same way" (Rumford 889). Where Marianne is initially conscious only of the national border that marks the outer reaches of her majority community, the Sikorskis, as Polish Jews, operate within the less visible cultural and linguistic borders of the wider borderland space. Only when Marianne experiences life as part of a minority community, first in Emmendorf and then back in Liegnitz/Legnica, do these less visible borders enter her consciousness.

Performing Borderland Identities through Linguistic Variation

I addressed earlier how language plays a role in demarcating shifting boundaries through a focus on changing place names and the increased othering that develops within contested spaces expressed through insults directed towards ethnic minority groups. The apparently monolingual "linguistic landscape" (Landry and Bourhis) of Marianne's childhood home tells of an accepted policy of cultural and linguistic assimilation in public spaces that belies the linguistic diversity of the community. Yet language plays a significant role in Liegnitz in defining linguistic communities, and a strong link exists between language and the traditions of ethnic communities. The visible performance of this ethnicity, particularly evidenced in *Wir Flüchtlingskinder*, is directly linked to power structures within the borderland population. As the Sikorski family demonstrates, minority status silences diverse voices and practices or leads them to be enacted only in private.

Such linguistic power play is shown to exist, too, within national languages, as individual language varieties are exploited for political effect. Marianne's family speaks the Silesian dialect as the language of their community. High German is the preserve of the education system, personified in Marianne's class teacher and the municipal authorities. Frau Grambow's efforts to compel parents to promote the use of High German beyond school meet indifference from Marianne's mother, who interprets the dropping of dialect as a denial of ethnic identity. Hitler's promotion of folk art as an expression of traditional German identity leads Marianne occasionally to become Grambow's favored student at public events, on account of her ability to use the local dialect to recite Silesian poetry. For Marianne, such performances of linguistic identity become a marker of a reversed power dynamic,¹⁷ while the dialect brings her closer to her mother in opposition to the High German of her teacher. This cultural bond between mother and daughter is only threatened when they are forced to leave Liegnitz and their community is torn asunder.

Across the newly formed borderlands intersected by the emerging GDR-Polish border, language once again becomes a marker of belonging, an element to define borders not just between communities but also between the municipal authorities and the general populace, as well as between generations. Marianne recognizes her mother's retention of her Silesian dialect in Saxony as a marker of cultural self-identification and belonging, a commitment to a way of life and to a locale she has been forced to leave behind. Frau

¹⁷ "Es war wie ein Sieg über sie" (*WF* 17).

Hönow's active resistance to adopting High German wholesale is brought into sharp relief by her ability to call upon it strategically when required. During the war, she insists on responding to the Nazi mayor of Emmendorf in dialect, only translating into High German as he feigns incomprehension (*WF* 90–91). As her use of dialect becomes more extensive, he finally capitulates:

“Excuse me?”

“I will ...”

“Okay, okay. You can go now. Heil Hitler!”¹⁸

This acknowledgement signals a small victory for Frau Hönow and her community over the self-appointed power of authoritarian bureaucracy. Marianne, watching this covert linguistic contest unfold, comes to view language as a moral gauge by which to measure an individual's actions and ideological stance. In the postwar period, the new communist mayor Hans Rathmann also uses High German, although happily engaging with Frau Hönow's use of dialect:

“You neither need to thank me nor pay anything. Is your husband in prison?”

“We dinnae ken and hivnae fir echt month. Wur ye in the war tae?”

“No.”

“Och, then ye wur lucky.”

“Perhaps.”

“Nah, nah, ye cin be gey glad.”

“Oh, you know what, no-one was happy where I was the last years.”

“May I speir whaur ye wur?”

“Of course, you may. Have you heard of Buchenwald?”

Mother was startled and hung her head.¹⁹

While he does not shy away from encouraging her to settle in her new home, his acceptance of her Silesian dialect suggests the potential for language and identity to be understood in a more nuanced way in the new political order.

In using dialect, Frau Hönow, at different times, linguistically enacts both resistance to the Nazi regime and a challenge to the new configuration of the borderlands in which she must live. It takes Marianne time to recognize the difference between the

¹⁸ “Wie bitte?”

“Ich werde ...”

“Schon gut, schon gut. Sie können jetzt gehen. Heil Hitler!” (*WF* 91)

¹⁹ “Sie haben mir weder zu danken, noch sollen Sie etwas bezahlen. Ihr Mann ist in Gefangenschaft?”

“Mir wissa nischt, schunn seit'm dreiviertel Joahr nimmer. — Worn Sie ooch eim Kriege?”

“Nein.”

“Nu, doa hoan Sie Glicke gehobt.”

“Vielleicht.”

“Nee, nee, doa kinna Sie wirklich fruh sein.”

“Ach, Wissen Sie, da, wo ich in den letzten Jahren war, war niemand froh darüber.”

“Doarf ma froaga, wu Sie woarn?”

“Natürlich dürfen Sie das. Haben Sie schon mal was von Buchenwald gehört?”

Mutter erschrak und senkte den Kopf. (*WF* 170)

Translator's note: to convey dialect usage, I have invoked Scots, a nationally recognized indigenous language of Scotland, as the power dynamic between the English and Scots languages is akin to that portrayed here.

reactionary rejection of the Oder-Neisse line she experiences in the West and the attitude of her mother, who is left conflicted by the new political realities and her sense of personal loss. Only the bunch of buttercups Marianne spontaneously gifts her mother at the end of *Wir Flüchtlingskinder*, following the news of the official ratification of the GDR-Polish border in July 1950, demonstrates her comprehension of the permanent personal trauma this political event causes Frau Hönow. In a parallel exchange at the end of Höntsch's second novel, Marianne accepts her mother's wish to go west, despite the personal difficulties it will bring. By crossing another border, by moving even further from Legnica, Frau Hönow hopes to come full circle:

“D’ye ken, Marjandla, awa’ in the hills, I can aye pretend ahm hame.”
I stroked her hands. It was a long time since she’d spoken of home.²⁰

The pull of home, the need to belong, continues to manifest itself in Frau Hönow's use of dialect, even if she seems finally to accept postwar realities. The particular location of Liegnitz and her past life there have become less significant than the emotions its landscape arouses. It is this feeling Frau Hönow longs to recreate. Retaining a strong sense of her own identity allows her to take agency again in reconceptualizing her sense of homeland, in rejecting officially defined borders.

In contrast, for the younger generation represented by Marianne, language becomes a marker not of inclusion, but rather of exclusion and division, once she leaves Liegnitz. In Emmendorf, their Silesian dialect marks out the refugees, setting them apart from the wider German community, which perceives them as unwelcome outsiders. Marianne's response is a rapid rejection of her own dialect in favor of that of her new home. This allows her to integrate with her new schoolmates and ostensibly become one of them. Marianne's rejection of her original dialect marks her acceptance of the new world order, newly drawn borders, and a new relationship with the GDR's Polish neighbors (*WK* 12–13). It also, however, makes visible new borders between the generations, as Marianne initially derides as boring and pointless her parents' continued commitment to their vanished lives. Further generational shifts in perspective become visible as Marianne accepts that teachers of the future must possess a good command of High German while rejecting neither the dialect nor memories of their former home. When Marianne uses High German for the first time in the private sphere of her home, her mother acknowledges this new professional rationale and applauds the linguistic empowerment Marianne can gain from command of both standard and dialect forms. Despite Frau Hönow's consistent use of dialect, she often proves more sociolinguistically aware of the links between language, power, and identity than her daughter. Later, in Höntsch's second work, Marianne remains stubborn in her rejection of dialect even in the face of her Polish pen-pal Wanda's obvious celebration of her own cultural and linguistic heritage and the influence of her Austrian grandmother (*WK* 16–17). This familial link to the Viennese dialect proves vital later in helping Wanda separate German language and culture from the wartime acts of military aggression threatening her family and homeland. Persuaded by her mother to use her German again, Wanda opts to study German language and literature in the hope of understanding the societal transformation that made Germany's actions possible (*WK* 106–7).

²⁰ “Weeßte, Marjandla, durt, ei a Berga, doa kenn iech mier immer eibilda, iech wär doaheeme.”
Ich streichelte ihre Hände. Sie hatte lange nicht mehr von zu Hause gesprochen. (*WK* 258)

Re-evaluating Borderland Spaces

Marianne is depicted by Höntsch as rejecting her family's traditional narrative of their sense of place, as she begins to adopt the political narrative of her new society that the redrawn borders mark the end of a historical and cultural age that cannot be recreated. In fact, she simply replaces one collective memory or narrative for another. The largely chronological narration of this gradual acceptance is interspersed in *Wir Flüchtlingskinder* with Marianne's diary entries, excerpts from newspaper articles, and official declarations and legal documents. Such authentic documents lend objectivity to the collective narrative, discouraging Marianne and the reader from questioning the official interpretation of events, their causes, and consequences.

Höntsch's reframing of German-Polish relations in *Wir sind keine Kinder mehr* through a narrative structure reflecting the development of communicative memory is more striking. Beate Kosmala recalls the establishment of a predominantly negative German image of the Poles during the Wilhelmine Empire and its intensification through changing political eras, to the point where a narrative of racial and cultural superiority dominated Nazi Germany (153). Such lingering negative stereotypes led the relationship between the GDR and the People's Republic of Poland to become what Ludwig Mehlhorn terms a "forced friendship," characterized by mutual ignorance and lack of communication. This situation finds cultural expression in restricted imaginings of "the Other." Elżbieta Dzikowska, for example, argues that, throughout their country's existence, the literary portrayal of Poland by GDR writers remained locked in the past, with Poland depicted more frequently as a locus of past loss and personal memory than as a contemporary political ally. The relationship, too, proved an uneven one, shaped inevitably by historical realities of political dominance and cultural suspicion, with the GDR's image of Poland remaining that of "the little-known neighbor" (Olschowsky).

In *Wir sind keine Kinder mehr*, Höntsch, unknowingly writing in the final years of the GDR, challenges such discourse. When Marianne, now eighteen, is given the opportunity to correspond with a representative of a fellow socialist country, she alights upon Wanda, who is living in Legnica in the street Marianne left years before. Marianne adopts the societally expected narrative of guilt and apology towards her new Polish acquaintance, but Wanda rejects being placed in the position of victim. Instead, she considers them equals – she, too, is a refugee, having been moved to Legnica from further east in the early post-war years. Displacement becomes a generalized societal reality rather than a unique cultural event. Höntsch also quickly establishes Wanda not just as a correspondent but as a significant peer mentor for Marianne in the latter's process of critical engagement with her own individual and societal narrative. In so doing, the author establishes important parallels between the two young women with regard to their migrant experiences, as well as the influence of the family, Party, and Church. That they have matured so differently is attributed to the contrasting interpretations of socialism prevalent in their respective countries and the values and critical outlook they have been encouraged to acquire.

In effect, the specific focus on the German-Polish borderlands enables Höntsch to invoke literary devices critiquing the GDR's political position and self-image. Her depiction of the relationship between the GDR and Poland, as represented through that between Marianne and Wanda, seeks to counter the expectations of a domestic readership.

Acknowledging political realities not welcomed by the GDR authorities in the late 1980s, she draws upon Poland's historically more critical stance to the Soviet Union to critique the GDR's ideological conformism. In an approach not common in GDR literature, she challenges the reader also to view Poland as a potential mentor figure to the GDR, particularly in relation to critical thinking and pedagogical approach.

The asynchronous correspondence, which takes place over many years, allows for periods of calm reflection and establishes a pattern of communicative memory-making to counter the national narrative of which Marianne is such an uncritical proponent. Wanda's technique to challenge this, for example, in relation to Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin, is to state her case, then await Marianne's repositioning of her opinion. She resists engaging in any extended exchange of opposing ideas that might risk simply cementing Marianne's trenchant views instead of encouraging her to explore other interpretations. In so doing, Wanda presents a model of inductive learning similar to that forwarded in GDR educational policy, but clearly not practiced in the formal education system Marianne has experienced. Their relationship is not unproblematic. The young women's correspondence is broken off on occasions, primarily with Wanda unable to tolerate Marianne's unthinking dogmatic statements: "no, I hadn't expected such a letter, above all not such an orthodox tone. I can't, and don't want to, say more... so don't expect post from me. And there's no need for you to write either; think rather about your narrow-mindedness and stubbornness."²¹ Yet, Marianne's eventual visit to Legnica is enhanced by Wanda's continual challenging of her ideas. As Ilse Nagelschmidt argues, "the Polish woman holds a mirror before her and forces her to seek within empty phrases for true meaning."²² Only by having her own words turned upon her is Marianne compelled to examine their meaning and impact on others.

Concluding Remarks

The change in narrative structure adopted by Höntsch from *Wir Flüchtlingskinder* to *Wir sind keine Kinder mehr* marks a clear shift towards a more critical and reflective engagement with GDR national narratives on the German-Polish borderlands in the second half of the 1980s. The largely uncritical narrative of the first novel makes the challenge raised by competing narrative perspectives and structure in the second even more striking. Höntsch ultimately presents Poland as an alternative, contemporaneous political reality to Ulbricht's and later Honecker's manifestation of "socialism on German soil." This is portrayed as a similar fusion of Soviet ideology and national tradition, with the addition of an authentic critical positioning that demands the continuation of debates around cultural narratives. Höntsch demonstrates the limitations of externally imposed geo-political borders in shaping and defining identity and controlling individual agency within contested spaces informed by cultural and communicative memory. In essence, her conscious exploitation of diverse genre forms and narrative voice, language variation, and intertextuality represents a form of border performativity in itself, reinforcing how the

²¹ "nein, einen solchen Brief hatte ich nicht erwartet, vor allem keinen solchen orthodoxen Ton. Mehr kann und will ich nicht sagen...Erwart also keine Post von mir. Und Du brauchst auch nicht zu schreiben, denk lieber über Deine Engstirnigkeit und Verbohrtheit nach." (*WK* 158)

²² "Die Polin hält ihr den Spiegel vor das Gesicht und zwingt sie, leere Worthüllen nach wirklichen Inhalten zu befragen" (703).

fluidity of narrative and cultural boundaries can create a productive transborder space, even after political boundaries are no longer contested.

Works Cited

- Assmann, Aleida. *Formen des Vergessens*. Göttingen: Wallstein, 2016.
- Assmann, Jan. "Kollektives Gedächtnis und kulturelle Identität." *Kultur und Gedächtnis*, ed. Jan Assmann and Tonio Hölscher, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988, pp. 9–19.
- Bergen, Doris L. "Instrumentalization of *Volksdeutschen* in German Propaganda in 1939: Replacing/Erasing Poles, Jews and Other Victims," *German Studies Review*, vol. 31, no. 3, 2008, pp. 447–70.
- Conacher, Jean E. *Transformation and Education in the Literature of the GDR*. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2020.
- Dzikowska, Elżbieta. *Gedächtnisraum Polen in der DDR-Literatur*. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 1998.
- Erl, Astrid, and Ann Rigney. *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory*. New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2009.
- Foucault, Michel. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977.
- Grasshoff, Udo. "Political Taboos in the German Democratic Republic." *German History*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2021, pp. 442–63.
- Hönts, Ursula. *Wir sind keine Kinder mehr*. Berlin: Mitteldeutscher Verlag, 1990.
- Hönts-Harendt, Ursula. *Wir Flüchtlingskinder*. Berlin: Mitteldeutscher Verlag, 1985.
- Kosmala, Beate. "Das Bild Polens in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und die deutsch-polnischen Beziehungen." *Deutschland, Polen und der Zweite Weltkrieg. Geschichte und Erinnerung*, ed. Jerzy Kochanowski and Beate Kosmala, Potsdam & Warsaw: Deutsch-Polnisches Jugendwerk, 2013, pp. 151–65.
- Kossert, Andreas. *Kalte Heimat. Die Geschichte der deutschen Vertriebenen nach 1945*. Munich: Siedler Verlag, 2008.
- Landry, Rodrigue, and Richard Y. Bourhis. "Linguistic Landscape and Ethnolinguistic Vitality: An Empirical Study." *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1997, pp. 23–49.
- Liotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, transl. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984.
- Mehlhorn, Ludwig. "Zwangsvorordnete Freundschaft? Die Entwicklung der Beziehungen zwischen der DDR und Polen 1949-1990." *Die deutsch-polnischen Beziehungen 1949–2000*, ed. Wolf-Dieter Eberwein and Basil Kerski, Wiesbaden: Springer, 2001, pp. 61–73.

- Mevissen, Sofie Friederike. "Geteiltes Gedächtnis. Die transkulturelle Kontaktzone Schlesien im deutschen und polnischen Generationenroman der Gegenwart." *Germanoslavica*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2022, pp. 97–109.
- Nagelschmidt, Ilse. "Der Kulturraum der Kindheit bei Christa Wolf, Ursula Höntsch, Helga Schütz und Vera Friedländer." *Tausend Jahre polnisch-deutsche Beziehungen. Sprache, Literatur, Kultur, Politik*, ed. Franziszek Grucza, Warsaw: Graf-Punkt, 2001, pp. 696–708.
- Newman, David, and Anssi Paasi. "Fences and Neighbours in the Postmodern World: Boundary Narratives in Political Geography." *Progress in Human Geography*, vol. 22, no. 2, 1998, pp. 186–207.
- Niven, Bill. *Representations of Flight and Expulsion in East German Prose Works*. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2014.
- Olschowsky, Burkhard. "Der wenig vertraute Nachbar – Das Bild Polens in der DDR 1945–1989." *Deutschland, Polen und der Zweite Weltkrieg. Geschichte und Erinnerung*, ed. Jerzy Kochanowski and Beate Kosmala, Potsdam & Warsaw: Deutsch-Polnisches Jugendwerk, 2013, pp. 166–179.
- Parker, Noel, and Nick Vaughan-Williams, et al. "Lines in the Sand? Towards an Agenda for Critical Border Studies." *Geopolitics*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2009, pp. 582–87.
- Parker, Noel, and Nick Vaughan-Williams. "Critical Border Studies: Broadening and Deepening the 'Lines in the Sand' Agenda." *Geopolitics*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2012, pp. 727–33.
- Polak-Springer, Peter. *Recovered Territory: A German-Polish Conflict over Land and Culture, 1919-1989*. New York/Oxford: Berghahn, 2015.
- Rumford, Chris. "Towards a Multiperspectival Study of Borders." *Geopolitics*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2012, 887–902.
- Salter, Mark B. "Theory of the/: The Suture and Critical Border Studies." *Geopolitics*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2012, pp. 734–55.