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Authors

May-Chu, Karolina
Wojcik, Paula

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Introduction: German-Polish Borderlands in Contemporary Literature and Culture

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Karolina May-Chu and Paula Wojcik

In this issue of *TRANSIT*, we are proud to present a special section with contributions on the representation of borders and borderlands in the literary and cultural landscapes of Germany and Poland. We have brought together scholarship, excerpts from an essayistic historical study, a creative essay, a poem, and two translated chapters from a Polish novel that explore past and present German and Polish borderlands through the lens of their entangled history. Focusing on works from different time periods, ranging from the end of the Second World War until today, the contributions examine past and present German-Polish borderlands from diverse angles, situating them historically while also underlining their significance within a global future.

In the decades following the end of the Cold War, there was a pervasive, if not necessarily accurate, optimistic feeling among many in Western Europe and North America, that we live in a globalized and increasingly borderless world. The 9/11 terrorist attacks and the US invasion of Iraq brought an end to this feeling and initiated a global resurgence of borders—both as physical demarcations and as ideological divides. This process has only accelerated over the last decade, with violent conflicts and climate crises in different parts of the world leading to the displacement of an unprecedented 108.4 million people by 2022 (UNHCR 2). Physical borders between nation states as well as the invisible, digital, “smart borders” reinforce global inequalities, and they function as “sorting machines” that separate desirable from “undesirable” migration (Mau).

Some events in this global rebordering process—most recently Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 and the ongoing war—have also put the German-Polish relationship in sharp relief. From the 1990s until 2015, the relationship between Poland and Germany was widely hailed as a model for European cooperation and reconciliation. While not without setbacks or a continued presence of stereotypes, this narrative suggested that both nations had largely overcome their difficult histories in their journey toward an equal partnership (Eigler 2-3). Today, this optimistic view has mostly disappeared. As Lidia Zessin-Jurek phrased it in a discussion in July 2023: “The wounds have healed, but the bones have set incorrectly” (Polley). Especially under Poland’s national-conservative Law and Justice party (PiS), which came into power in 2015, political differences and tensions have grown stronger. Over the past decade, the anti-German and anti-EU stance of the Polish government, the resurgence of historical debates about reparations, the fight over the acceptance of refugees, accusations of Germany’s lack of commitment to Ukraine in response to Russia’s invasion, and last but not least the conflict over the contamination of the Oder River and the mass fish die-offs in 2022 have strained German-Polish relations.

Under the pressure of these recent events and developments, many fractures have become apparent again. Following the Second World War and the destruction waged by the

Germans, the official reconciliation process began with the Conferences at Yalta and Potsdam in 1945, and it seemed to have reached initial stages of completion in 1950 and 1970, when first the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and then the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) officially recognized the Oder-Neisse border. However, it was not until the German-Polish Border Treaty of 1990, signed by unified Germany, that concerns about the finality of the border were finally laid to rest. Still, political agreements and official pronouncements as well as the periodic warming of relations during the Cold War, have not consistently worked their way into the depths of the collective memory and social consciousness, neither in Poland, nor in East or West or later unified Germany. Here, literature and other forms of artistic expression have often taken on the important role of challenging monolithic national narratives and myths, and bringing to light the repressed, traumatic, and often shameful moments of the entangled German-Polish history.

The works of German and Polish writers such as Günter Grass and Stefan Chwin, and more recently Olga Tokarczuk, Ulrike Draesner, or Sabrina Janesch (to name only a few) address the universal nature of suffering, dismantle simplistic victim-perpetrator narratives, and above all show how arbitrary, ephemeral, and at the same time violent borders can be. Literature and art demonstrate that official borders rarely correspond to personal histories and experiences. Rather, they frequently cut through communities, families, and individuals' lives without regard for the complexity of local identities and the multi-ethnic character of borderland regions. These creative expressions often reveal that a successful healing process can be very painful as it opens up old wounds and questions narratives that have been taken for granted. It is precisely this ability to put a finger on the historical wound that holds the potential to initiate a dialogue. Literature and art invite us to reflect on the (groundbreaking and yet fragile) achievement of a seemingly borderless Europe and its reverse side: the deepening divides among people, groups, and nations, and the accelerating fortification of its external borders.

Over the past three decades, there has been significant scholarly interest in Europe and North America in the cultural representation of Polish and German borderlands. With this special section, the authors build on this scholarship and expand on conversations we began at the German Studies Association (GSA) conference in 2019, where we devoted two panels to discussing how German and Polish authors and artists have imagined borders and transborder relations since the Second World War. In addition to the scholarly perspectives presented in this special section, we are happy to include here the work of Inga Iwasiów, Dagmara Kraus, and Karolina Kuszyk, three authors whose creative works and essays examine borders from intimate and individual perspectives. They shed light on the multifarious effects that borders have on people's sense of belonging and the material culture surrounding them, and they show how borders shape and transform language. These broad issues and questions resonate throughout our volume. Some contributions focus on memory discourses and the presence of the past in current cultural productions in Germany and Poland while others are more oriented towards the European present and future, asking how old borders, new borders—or perhaps, indeed, the absence of borders—structure this transnational landscape. They address themes such as migration and mobility, collective memory and forgetting, and the narrative construction of identities. The contributions also explore how national-cultural borders intersect with

questions of gender, sexuality, or class, how the past is encoded in material culture, and what different narratives can tell us about the status of Polish-German relations.

The city of Wrocław/Breslau was and is the cultural metropole of the former Eastern German, now Western Polish border region. In her contribution “**Remapping Breslaff (Wrocław+Breslau). German and Gay Culture in Current Polish Literature,**” Alicja Kowalska examines two novels that explore the city's past from very different perspectives. Marek Krajewski's *Death in Breslau* (1999, *Śmierć w Breslau*) is the first installment in a popular detective series set in the German city of Breslau in the 1930s. The novels address the German past of the city, thus breaking with a taboo that was maintained by the Communist government throughout the Cold War. Communist memory politics had also sought to erase homosexuality and gay culture from public consciousness, as Kowalska shows in her examination of Michał Witkowski's *Lovetown* (2004, *Lubiewo*), which is considered the first Polish gay novel. The parallel reading of these novels opens up a kaleidoscope of historical caesuras and geographical as well as social boundary shifts, which, as Kowalska writes, aim to deconstruct the *grand récit* of “Poland as a culturally homogenous state.”

The challenge of finding new and more inclusive narratives for the conflicted space of the borderland is also highlighted in Karolina May-Chu's contribution “**Reimagining the German-Polish Borderlands in Nowa Amerika and Stubfurt.**” May-Chu analyzes how an activist-art project—the fictional country *Nowa Amerika* with its capital *Stubfurt*—imagines and constructs the German-Polish borderland as a more cosmopolitan space. *Nowa Amerika* is partially situated in formerly German areas that became part of Poland after the Second World War, and the analysis highlights how the project challenges divisive political, cultural, and social boundaries through creative performances and events. The article discusses how the project attempts to create a new reality for the borderland by bringing together people from both sides of the Oder River, including newly arrived migrants and people seeking refuge. At the same time, the project tends to elide discussions of the more problematic aspects of the region's history, and the article invites thinking about the tensions that are embedded in cosmopolitan projects in general, as well as the challenges and taboos in the relationship between Germany and Poland in particular.

For at least the duration of the Cold War, such taboos included open discussions about the distinct character of Poland's former German territories. In “**The Reconciliatory Potential of Objects in Stefan Chwin's novel *Death in Danzig*,**” Svetlana Vassileva-Karagyozyova focuses on the function of post-German objects in the novel *Death in Danzig (Hanemann)* by Stefan Chwin. Published in 1995, the novel is considered an important milestone in Polish literary history as it addresses the immediate postwar period and the population shifts that took place during that time. In Chwin's Danzig/Gdańsk, the Germans have been displaced or fled, but for the arriving Poles, they are still present in the household items and other objects they left behind. Drawing on theories of new materialism, Vassileva-Karagyozyova shows that these everyday things can be read post-anthropocentrically. The author argues that the “post-anthropocentrism reveals itself in the writer's deliberate focus on human and nonhuman materiality in depicting the historical transformation of Danzig/Gdańsk from a German to a Polish city.” By “giving visibility and a voice to the material possessions” left behind, the previous German owners no longer appear as an anonymous mass of perpetrators, but as

individuals. The intention of such a perspective is not revisionism, but rather a careful look at the complex historical entanglements of nations and peoples as well as the blurring of lines between victims and perpetrators when they share experiences of expulsion and resettlement.

The shared traumatic experiences of flight, expulsion, and the associated “Heimatverlust” are also the main topics in **Sabine Egger’s** article “**Train journeys in postmemorial narratives of Heimatverlust: Reinhard Jirgl’s *Die Unvollendeten* and Sabrina Janesch’s *Katzenberge*.**” Focusing on two autobiographically inspired German-language novels, published in 2003 and 2010, respectively, Egger analyzes how both unfold the motif, topoi, and symbol of the railway (including its metonymic extensions, such as train, wagon, station). Against the background of Michael Rothberg’s notion of “multidirectional memory” and Marianne Hirsch’s concept of “postmemory” the author argues that the railway, as a “key symbol of expulsion in German-language film and literature,” evokes traumatic experiences like flight, persecution, loss, and death in different contexts and time periods without equating them. Rather, Egger emphasizes the difference between the novels: While for Sabrina Janesch, the history of her grandfather being resettled from Galicia to Lower Silesia is part of a “transnational European memory discourse,” Reinhard Jirgl stresses the “universal nature of inhumanity” in his story of four women’s expulsion from the Czech Sudetenland and their lives under communism in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Addressing suffering and loss from the perspective of the second (Jirgl) and third (Janesch) generation, Egger also shows how irreversibly the literary meaning of the railroad has shifted: What had been a symbol of progress and recreational travel for the privileged in the 19th century, in the 20th century became a symbol of dehumanization.

The changes in collective memory and individual memory within a changing political system, in this case the German Democratic Republic shortly before its end, are the focus of **Jean Conacher’s** contribution “**Contested Memory and Narrative within GDR-Polish Intercultural Landscapes: Ursula Höntsch’s *Wir Flüchtlingskinder* (1985) and *Wir sind keine Kinder mehr* (1990).**” Conacher draws on the concept of literary landscapes by David Newman and Anssi Paasi and the distinction between a collective and a communicative memory (Aleida Assmann, Astrid Erll) to demonstrate how the German-Polish borderlands serve as a space of geopolitical imagination. The novels by GDR author Ursula Höntsch focus on the border region of Silesia, where the author herself has lived before she moved to East Germany, and so the Silesian identity and language are of particular concern. Although both texts were written within a period of only five years, Conacher shows that the “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.”

In addition to these scholarly perspectives, we are delighted to present in this issue a number of essayistic and creative contributions that speak poignantly about borders and their painful effects while also revealing their complex and often contradictory nature. **Dagmara Kraus** is a poet and translator, and currently a professor of literary writing at the University of Hildesheim, Germany. She was born in Poland and grew up in Germany, and her polylingual and translingual writing deals with navigating multiple cultures and languages and the fluidity of the boundaries between them.

Included in this volume is a reprint of Kraus' poem "**liedvoll, deutschyzno moja,**" annotated by **Karolina May-Chu** and **Paula Wojcik**. The poem was written in December 2015 and published in a poetry collection by the same title in 2020. Interweaving Polish and German language, the poem is a reflection on the so-called refugee crisis of 2015. The opening lines "millions of displaced words stand / at the border of this poem" create a semantic space of flight that frames a reflection on language. Within this space, Kraus explores how (easily) language adapts to new post migrant realities of a globalized world by morphological or syntactic changes, phonetic shifts, amalgamations, or integration of new words. The whole spectrum of language and its functions from the poetic to the referential is also the topic of the autobiographically inspired essay "**Goethetak! Selbstporträt mit Wörtern**" that Dagmara Kraus prepared especially for our collection. The essay's central motif is travel, which includes the author's real-life travels and relocations as well as travels through the literature, history, and intellectual history of Poland and Germany. Above all, however, it is a journey through language, the re-listening, mis-hearing, re-understanding, non-understanding, and the constant renewal and transformation of language. In this regard, the essay also reads as the author's poetological program of a language beyond borders.

Questions of borders and the transgression of borders are also central to the work of Polish writer and feminist literary scholar **Inga Iwasiów**. Even though Iwasiów, who is a professor at the University of Szczecin, is a renowned scholar and author in Poland, her major works have yet to appear in German or English translation.¹ We include her here as an important voice when seeking to understand the history and present of German-Polish relations. From 1999 to 2012 the Szczecin-born author was editor-in-chief of the bi-monthly literary and cultural journal *Pogranicza* (Engl. "Borderlands," published between 1994-2012). Since her literary debut in 1998, she has published poetry, short prose, and seven novels, including most recently, *Późne życie* (Engl. "Late Life") in 2023. In this issue we present two chapters of Iwasiów's first novel *Bambino* (2008), translated into English by **Karolina Hicke** and **Karolina May-Chu**. *Bambino* speaks to the complexity of political and social boundaries and the multiple ways in which people cross borders and are crossed by them. As the translated excerpts show, the shifting borders of Poland after the Second World War and the transformation of German Stettin to Polish Szczecin are of central significance to the novel and the lives of its protagonists.

Cities like Szczecin, Gdańsk, Słubice, Wrocław and other places mentioned in our special section, became part of Poland after the Second World War, but their integration into the new national narrative proved difficult. In her 2019 book *Ponemieckie* (Engl. "post-German," published in German as *In den Häusern der anderen* in 2022), **Karolina Kuszyk**, a Polish author and translator who lives in Berlin, illuminates the presence of the German and Jewish pasts in these and other places. The term "post-German" expresses a persistent phantom pain: the Polish communist government promoted narratives in which these territories had been "regained" or "repatriated" for Poland, but their German past was still visible in urban structures, household items, or

¹ Only very little of Iwasiów's writing has been translated into English or German. For brief excerpts in English from some of her novels, including *Bambino*, please see the author's website. For her essay on one of the novel's main characters, see "Ingeleine, du wirst groß sein," and for a reflection on post-German traces in Szczecin, see: "Die Ungeliebten."

inscriptions on buildings. The Germans (including German Jews) were no longer there, but traces of their former presence remained and clashed with the new inhabitants' needs to find a place to call home. Many of our articles refer directly or indirectly to "post-German" objects and spaces, and we are grateful to be able to include here excerpts from Kuszyk's book, which was translated into German by **Bernhard Hartmann**. According to Kuszyk, the intention of this book was not to provide a scholarly examination but rather a series of observations and a personal guide through a post-German landscape (21).

In light of constantly renewing political, social, and cultural tensions and a desire for clearly defined and unambiguous national spaces, we look towards literary and cultural representations of the borderland that foster shared memorial spaces and advance a German-Polish dialog within a broader European setting. Far from exhausting the subject, we interrogate the contradictory nature of the borderland as both a space of division and of contact, and we examine how writers and artists negotiate its historical and present complexity. With the contributions assembled here we invite further reflection on German-Polish borderlands: on their real and symbolic constitution, their fluid and changing nature, and how they accommodate or fail to accommodate different scales of belonging that range from local to global.²

² We would like to thank the editors of *TRANSIT*, especially Elizabeth Sun, Sean Lambert, and Deniz Göktürk, for their guidance and support in bringing this issue together. We would also like to thank the guest editors, Xan Holt and Kristin Kopp, as well as the anonymous peer reviewers for helping us bring this special section to publication.

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