



# INSCRIPTION AND REBELLION

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Illness and the  
Symptomatic Body  
in East German  
Literature

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**SONJA E. KLOCKE**

## *Inscription and Rebellion*

*Studies in German Literature, Linguistics, and Culture*

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## Illness and the Symptomatic Body in East German Literature

Sonja E. Klocke



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## Introduction

IN THE 2003 MOVIE *Good Bye, Lenin!*, the staunch socialist Christiane Kerner witnesses East Berlin's *Volkspolizei* (people's police) ruthlessly clubbing peaceful demonstrators during the celebrations marking the fortieth anniversary of the founding of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in October 1989.<sup>1</sup> When she discovers her teenage son Alex among the predominantly young people demanding freedom of the press and the right to travel without restrictions, Christiane suffers a near-fatal heart attack, falls into a coma, and is hospitalized. When she awakens eight months later, the Berlin Wall has fallen, and the new furniture and appliances in the family's apartment signal the changes in society. The doctors warn Alex that any anxiety could kill her, prompting him to protect his mother from the historical transformations by reconstructing the GDR in and also as her sickroom. Christiane's death three days after German unification (October 3, 1990) and the dispersal of her ashes in the wind correlate with the end of the East German socialist state. Alex highlights this idea at the end of the film: "Das Land, das meine Mutter verließ, war ein Land, an das sie geglaubt hatte. . . . Ein Land, das in meiner Erinnerung immer mit meiner Mutter verbunden sein wird." (The country my mother left was a country she believed in. . . . A country that in my memory will always be linked with my mother.)<sup>2</sup> Alex's final words link the grief over his mother's death with the demise of the socialist state she believed in. They leave the audience with an opportunity to mourn the GDR, which symbolically comes to an end when the mother's body vanishes into thin air. When Alex emphasizes the role memory plays in connecting the GDR with Christiane, he points to the female character's function as a reminder of cultural, political, and historical memory. The son remembers the GDR through his mother, assigning her a commemorative function that suggests to the audience how history from below is an addition and a challenge to hegemonic historiography.<sup>3</sup>

This film became the biggest commercial success of any German film since the fall of the Berlin Wall. It won numerous European awards, circulated internationally, and was nominated for a Golden Globe for Best Foreign Language Film. It brings together several topics: the (final days of the) GDR and its state authorities' brutal exercise of power; a gendered body reacting physically and submitting to medical treatment in a GDR hospital; and the cultural, political, and historical memory of the GDR linked to an ailing female body. These topics are also crucial

in a significant number of East German literary texts. Their convergence forms the core of the prose works analyzed in this book. This includes GDR as well as post-GDR texts written by authors who lived in and portray the GDR, published both before and after October 1990.<sup>4</sup>

The conspicuous existence of post-1989 texts focusing on the GDR and the noted convergence of topics in East German literature raise several questions. First, why does the GDR remain a persistent topic, well into the twenty-first century? After all, *Good Bye, Lenin!* is not a singular phenomenon but one of many popular texts that revolve around, remember, and often creatively re-imagine the GDR.<sup>5</sup> Second, what is the significance of ill, female (both cis- and transgender) bodies and of GDR medical institutions at the center of many texts focusing on the GDR and its demise?<sup>6</sup> And finally, to what extent is this convergence of illness, gender, bodies, and the (socialist) state a literary convention that is specific to East German literature? If this custom proliferated in GDR literature, how did it develop after unification?

To explore these questions, this book offers a dual approach. In the first part, it examines prose texts by Christa Wolf (1929–2011), the GDR's most prominent writer, who ideologically and emotionally identified with the socialist state. Emphasizing the importance of her portrayal of ill female bodies and the healthcare system, the first two chapters demonstrate how Wolf mobilized her work to expose imperfections and inconsistencies of the socialist state through representations of illness inscribed on female characters who are subjected to male-dominated medical institutions. Chapter 1 concentrates on the author's pre-unification texts and particularly on *Nachdenken über Christa T.* (1968; *The Quest for Christa T.*, 1970), which highlights the female body marked by psychosomatic ailments and fatal disease in order to expose the obstacles Wolf discerned in advancing the socialist state.<sup>7</sup> The protagonist's physical reaction to political events of the 1950s and 1960s is illness and death. Read with a focus on the body as it relates to its socio-political environment, the text reveals the author's ongoing belief in the future of socialism. Chapter 2 discusses developments in Wolf's writing strategies after the fall of the Wall. For example, *Leibhaftig* (2002; *In the Flesh*, 2005) focuses more centrally and dramatically on the ill female body than any other of Wolf's novels. Reading it in conjunction with *Stadt der Engel oder The Overcoat of Dr. Freud* (2010; *City of Angels, Or the Overcoat of Dr. Freud*, 2013) reveals the extent to which bodies serve as symbolic spaces where political conflicts and the individual's struggles play themselves out in Wolf's oeuvre, both pre- and post-unification. This comparative approach further uncovers how Wolf negotiates societal problems and discourses surrounding the memory of the GDR through medical discourses after the historical turning point of 1989.

The second half of this study traces the ways in which Wolf's representations of ill female bodies and of the GDR healthcare system have

inspired the literary production of writers who were raised in the GDR, were shaped by its political system, and who have published either predominantly or exclusively after 1989.<sup>8</sup> Discourses on bodies as well as the medical system, including the genetic and pharmaceutical research conducted on patients in the GDR as retrospectively imagined in Kerstin Hensel's *Lärchenau* (Lärchenau, 2008), Kathrin Schmidt's *Die Gunnar-Lennefsen-Expedition* (The Gunnar-Lennefsen-Expedition, 1998), and Thomas Brussig's *Wie es leuchtet* (How It Shines, 2004), are the topics of chapter 3. Chapter 4 explores Antje Rávic Strubel's *Sturz der Tage in die Nacht* (When Days Plunge into Night, 2012), Kathrin Schmidt's *Du stirbst nicht* (You Are Not Going to Die, 2009), and again Kerstin Hensel's *Lärchenau*. These post-GDR novels use bodies and medical discourses to reveal vestiges of the GDR lingering in unified Germany. In a manner reminiscent of Christa Wolf's writing style, the GDR, and sometimes even the fascist German past, emerge as overshadowing contemporary East German lives as expressed in the characters' suffering. Here bodies that are preoccupied with—and often plagued by—their GDR past provide readers with a sense of the lived experiences of GDR citizens; experiences that—in the manner of a history from below—give voice to those previously marginalized in a way that can add to, and challenge, hegemonic historiography.

The close readings offered in chapters 3 and 4 illustrate how these younger post-GDR authors playfully engage with Wolf's oeuvre and writing style and implicitly or explicitly refer to her use of ill bodies and the depiction of medical institutions. Both the novels that retrospectively imagine the GDR—explored in chapter 3—and the fictional texts that portray suffering characters haunted by their GDR past—probed in chapter 4—disclose the underlying propinquity of Christa Wolf and her works. Through this comparative look at individual post-GDR prose texts, we can see how even in very recent fiction that may not initially seem concerned with the GDR, the socialist state uncannily surfaces in medical discourses or is signaled by bodies suffering from illness. This study thus maps a genealogy of an East German literary convention: indicating, criticizing, and rebelling against political and social norms and constraints is depicted in specific instances, states, and manifestations of the body within the operations of a healthcare system. It is a poetic practice that has not only continued, but proven fertile in generating portraits of the GDR, its demise and its wholesale subsumption by the FRG, as well as the loss of utopian energy in post-GDR fiction. In order to render the significance of ill bodies in East German prose fiction visible, this study establishes a conceptual framework in which research investigating the GDR medical system—a system shaped by Marxist-Leninist thought—and scholarship on the significance of the female body for conceptions of the nation and German history intersect.

## “Health Is a Valuable Asset of the State”: The Idiosyncrasies of the GDR Healthcare System

German studies scholarship has pointed to the proliferation of fictional discourses about illness and health—predominantly, but not exclusively, in East German literature—in the aftermath of the so-called *Wende* of 1989/90, and explained the phenomenon as a means to express threats to the social body after the fall of the Wall.<sup>9</sup> This observation, while accurate, overlooks the fact that depictions of illness and bodies in medical institutions were already abundant in GDR literature before the fall of the Wall; and they continue to play a vital role in post-GDR fiction written in the twenty-first century.<sup>10</sup> Given the profusion of discourses of pathology in East German literature dealing with the idiosyncrasies of the political situation both before and after unification, it might seem surprising that scholarship has largely neglected to focus on the links between illness, medical institutions, and history.<sup>11</sup> Yet the disregard for the portrayal of the GDR medical system and its patients pre- and post-unification may partially be explained by the lack of serious and unbiased scholarly work on the specificity of the quotidian reality in GDR medical institutions. Such research would have to build on archival material as much as on the testimony of contemporary witnesses whose individual experiences, taken in their entirety, could illuminate the complex processes at work in medical institutions as well as these institutions’ cooperation with individual stakeholders. While serious attempts to expand such research have been made in the last few years and continue to be made, scholarship on the subject is clearly still in its fledgling stages.<sup>12</sup>

In *The People’s State*, Mary Fulbrook points out that in the GDR, “as everywhere, the very physical existence of people—their births, the pattern of their illnesses, the manner and timing of their deaths—cannot be disentangled from the circumstances in which they lived” (90). Without doubt, the political, social, and also the GDR medical system was different from that of all other German-speaking countries; and while the GDR as a political entity has ceased to exist, the cultural aspects persist, including a medical culture influenced by and medical staff trained in accordance with Marxist-Leninist thought.<sup>13</sup> Precisely because of this link between illness and politics, medical discourses that surface in GDR and post-GDR literature produced by writers who experienced the GDR medical system first-hand can be enlightening. I therefore place depictions not only of diseased female (both cis- and transgender) bodies, but also of the healthcare system in East German literature into dialogue with the available medical-historical research. Additionally, I investigate the link between the medical system and surveillance by the Stasi.<sup>14</sup> This approach demonstrates East German literature’s capacity to function as a reservoir of knowledge about everyday culture in the

GDR which can contribute to writing a GDR history that challenges dominant narratives.

Michel Foucault's work on the emergence of medical institutions since the eighteenth century informs our understanding of how governments increasingly control medical institutions and therapeutic spaces. The latter were linked with other state institutions such as prisons or courts in order to enforce norms resulting from medical "truth" and contingent on culture and history.<sup>15</sup> Considering the medical realm as part of a larger power network is essential in the case of the GDR, which built and later consolidated various state institutions along the lines of Marxist-Leninist ideology. As early as 1946, people's health and access to free medical care for everyone in the Soviet Occupied Zone were of official concern, and the Soviet Military Administration began developing a nationalized healthcare system. The overall concept was based on healthcare policies propagated by the German labor movement prior to the "Third Reich" and the Soviet model. Lenin's idea that health presented "ein wertvolles Staatseigentum" (a valuable asset of the state) linked healthcare with the state's interest in utilizing each citizen's productivity for the building of socialism.<sup>16</sup> From the start, however, improving citizens' health was also seen as an aspect of "democratization." For many people, the new socialist system constituted a significant improvement regarding access to healthcare. At the same time, the ideological emphasis on the collective implied that the individual was to be physically incorporated into the socialist state. In other words, the individual bodies came to be regarded as the property of the GDR and thus as representative of, even capable of standing in symbolically for the state and its socialist values.

Since symbolic and physical appropriation could not be detached from each other, the body's perfect semiotic performance depended on its state of physical health—which had to be controlled and regulated by a variety of state institutions, particularly the medical system. Since the 1950s, the widely circulated slogan "die beste Prophylaxe ist der Sozialismus" (the best prophylaxis is socialism) accordingly points to the significance of prevention, both on the medical and the social level.<sup>17</sup> Again, overcoming social difference clearly included eliminating health disparities caused by class difference.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, the individual had no chance to opt out: since the body was deemed both a possession and a metonymic representation of the socialist state, failure to participate in preventive programs would have been tantamount to an attack on state property.

To enforce this conception of the socialist body as a public asset whose health had to be assured, the government attempted to anchor the medical system ideologically by placing reliable members of the ruling *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands* (SED, Socialist Unity Party of Germany) in significant new positions in the public health sector and particularly in university hospitals.<sup>19</sup> Both the facilities and the medical



staff were integrated into the centralized state-run system and became subject to a socialist professional ethics that emphasized each doctor's responsibility towards society over patient care.<sup>20</sup> Several university reforms, the first introduced as early as 1946, ensured that degree programs in medicine were adapted accordingly by incorporating new compulsory classes in areas including the humanities, Marxism-Leninism, and political economy.

Compared with these swift modifications, the infiltration of the medical system by Stasi informants began later, in the second half of the 1950s, after Erich Mielke assumed office as Minister for State Security in November 1957.<sup>21</sup> While his predecessor Ernst Wollweber had focused on Stasi activities outside the GDR, Mielke considered domestic affairs more significant. The medical system came into focus because of the high number of physicians and nurses who left the GDR before the Wall was built in 1961, which resulted in a dramatic shortage of physicians and nursing staff and placed a strain on remaining coworkers.<sup>22</sup> While the Wall mitigated the crisis in the healthcare system as the number of physicians leaving the GDR decreased after 1961, the situation worsened again in the 1970s when more employees took advantage of relaxed travel restrictions for professionals in the Honecker years and left for the West. Consequently, Stasi infiltration in medical institutions, particularly in hospitals, increased steadily in subsequent years: the aim was less to gather information about patients than to gain knowledge about physicians planning to leave the country illegally.<sup>23</sup> A 1976 order issued by the Ministry for State Security also cast Stasi officers in the somewhat surprising role of mediating between hospitals and doctors, and later between physicians and the SED. They participated in finding solutions for conflicts that doctors, in particular, had to face in their quotidian life in GDR hospitals (Süß, *Pm*, 234).

GDR law placed a great deal of power in the hands of physicians—power that could easily be directed against individual patients' interests. The GDR-specific doctor-patient relationship in particular, in which there was no legal contract between a patient and a doctor, meant that the responsibility for balancing the protection of a patient's individual health and the greater good of the community rested entirely with the physician. In this context, the physician Susanne Hahn highlights the major difference between the GDR's *Betreuungsverhältnis* (medical care relationship) and legal practice in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG):

Während in der BRD der ärztliche Eingriff im Strafrecht . . . als Körperverletzung galt und bis heute gilt, die nur durch die Einwilligung des Patienten exkulpiert werden kann, war der indizierte und lege artis durchgeführte ärztliche Eingriff in der DDR prinzipiell eine Heilbehandlung.

[While in the FRG a medical intervention has been and still is considered an infliction of bodily harm in criminal law, which can only be suspended by means of a patient's consent, a prescribed medical intervention deemed necessary and carried out according to standard practice was, as a matter of principle, considered therapy in the GDR.]<sup>24</sup>

GDR law left decisions regarding a prescribed therapy exclusively to the physician. While the medical staff tried to persuade patients to agree to compulsory examinations and, if applicable, to treatment, patients knew they were obligated to follow doctors' orders either way. As "socialist personalities" firmly committed to the advancement of socialism, it was incumbent upon patients to cooperate since individual health and the health of the community—in analogy to personal and societal interests—were considered one entity.<sup>25</sup> Accordingly, patients had to participate in any measure supporting the *Volksgesundheit* (community health), such as preventative personal hygiene, vaccination campaigns, and medical screenings.<sup>26</sup>

This centralized approach proved most successful in healthcare technology assessment and in combating cancer. The GDR established a World Health Organization-certified Comprehensive Cancer Center, which positioned the socialist state as an international leader in cancer prevention, but which was dismantled in the unification process.<sup>27</sup> While protecting one's health ceased to be a private matter, and notions of individual choice and doctor-patient confidentiality were considered secondary to the health of the entire population, the individual benefitted from the overall success of preventative care.<sup>28</sup> On the downside, these measures implied state control, which extended to fields tangentially related to the medical sphere. Since the protection of individuals' health was an effort of society at large, power exercised in healthcare was tightly linked with the judicial system and social welfare, and often also included the support received from a working person's collective.<sup>29</sup> In other words, while GDR citizens benefitted from the healthcare system in a supposedly classless society, these benefits simultaneously demanded compliance with the needs and goals of GDR society at large.

Class differences emerged primarily in terms of privilege when the socialist state encountered glitches that presented obstacles to its goal of providing adequate healthcare services to everyone. While in the FRG and other capitalist countries the economic situation of the patient is the main factor in determining privilege in the healthcare system, in the supposedly classless society of the GDR the system of privilege was largely a function of politics.<sup>30</sup> Members of the government, political cadres, high-ranking military officers, veterans of the "antifascist struggle," and representatives of the wider socialist elite—including members of the cultural

intelligentsia—were treated in special hospitals that were substantially better equipped with supplies and medical technology.<sup>31</sup> Yet, since the semiotic function of every citizen's physical body for the state depended on its health, all regular hospitals did not as a rule differentiate among patients admitted.<sup>32</sup> While socialist countries, too, needed to make decisions regarding the availability of specialized care for specific patients, the GDR was generally interested in providing all citizens—who, after all, formed the collective—with the best care the state could possibly afford to ensure the well-being of its assets, or: the bodies that also served as the metonymic representation of the GDR. In other words, if those bodies became ill, they temporarily escaped the state's control in what amounted to a form of rebellion. In these instances the impairment of the body's semiotic performance doubled as damage to state resources.

## Symptomatic Bodies as a Form of Rebellion and Corporeal Memory

As indicated earlier, this book's point of departure—the convergence of illness, gender, representations of the body, and the (socialist) state in the discursive field of East German fiction—raises questions of literary conventions, politics, and historiography. When tackling these concerns and themes, the physicality of the body and the significance of corporeal memory for understanding and interpreting the past inevitably move to the forefront. Sigrid Weigel asserted that memory discourses in Western traditions developed a tendency to downplay corporeal memory, not least of all as a result of the significance assigned to psychoanalytical models deemed capable of dealing with the past in order to incorporate it into the present and the future.<sup>33</sup> Without aiming to slight the importance of psychoanalytical approaches, I emphasize the corporeal dimension of lived experience. As I will demonstrate in what follows, the knowledge embodied in what I call the *symptomatic body* comes to the fore as a powerful socioaesthetic construct in East German literature. The symptomatic body in these fictional worlds is identified as female by the society in which it moves; historical and political events leave their traces on the character's flesh and/or psyche, where they appear as physical and/or psychological illness.

The symptoms range from headaches, fevers, and blindness to severe depression and loss of speech. Sometimes, sickness opens up possibilities for temporary escape from uncomfortable circumstances or psychic conflicts; at other times, physical symptoms serve as warning signs that allow a fictional character to prepare for outside threats. Scars on the body indicate violent experiences during surgery or imprisonment; they can even

be deciphered as a tattooed number burned into the flesh in a Nazi concentration camp. The fictional characters who endure the various physical and psychological wounds largely understand the opportunities inherent in their suffering: supported by their symptoms, these bodies gain access to previously hidden memories and to knowledge of the past. When the historical learning process materializes in a visible inscription on the flesh, these bodies become mnemonic sites. While the fictional characters analyzed in this study take up very different positions vis-à-vis the social reality that triggers their symptoms, their bodies all produce insight into or increased awareness of a political situation and often greater cognizance of their individual entanglement in political affairs. Symptomatic bodies placed in specific historical circumstances—such as revolutions or wars—invite us to read them as allegories for the body politic: a character's health is then turned into a seismograph of the state of the country. A severely ill character might mirror a state struggling for survival: disease thus indicates social problems and criticizes political norms. A character's physical breakdown might challenge the ideology at the core of a portrayed state; a patient's survival, in turn, can signal victory and possibly confirm an ideology.

While the prototype is the cis-gender female body marked by illness, the spectrum of symptomatic bodies also includes transgender and transsexual female bodies as well as persons with intersexual bodies who choose to identify as female.<sup>34</sup> Of particular interest in these literary texts are cis- and transgender, transsexual, and intersexual females who are forced to submit to a healthcare provider because the diegetic social world in which they move considers this necessary. This can, for example, affect pregnant women as well as transsexual persons forced to undergo surgery. Both the depicted medical systems and the traces left on the body as a consequence of their therapeutic interventions speak to the power of the socio-political forces at work in the examined prose texts. Understood in this manner as a socioaesthetic construct in literature and a locus of cultural inscriptions,<sup>35</sup> symptomatic bodies can be analyzed with regard to their aptitude to resist, display, or reinforce structures of domination in the displayed fictional worlds.

Simone Barck's claim that GDR fiction is a more illuminating source of knowledge about GDR society than scholarly publications by historians includes the medical realm and medical historiography.<sup>36</sup> This is particularly true since in the GDR, discussions surrounding problematic topics—such as, for example, questions regarding ethics in the medical field—tended to take place in small circles, not in public forums supported by the media. Since the GDR mass media merely broadcast experts' decisions, much of the reflection about illness and patients in medical institutions in the GDR that became available to the general public was

conveyed through literature and film.<sup>37</sup> As a result, GDR fiction presents a remarkable archive of information about daily life and issues debated in GDR society. Texts that depict symptomatic bodies and the healthcare system reveal cultural and ideological discourses in medical institutions as well as norms governing GDR society. This includes, but is by no means limited to, the signifiers for pathology, since GDR citizens clearly understood the medical system as a part of society that reflected both the problems and the standards governing their GDR world at large.<sup>38</sup> Especially because they are engendered and socialized in their particular cultural and political environment, bodies privy to the social experience of the GDR reveal both that society's particular norms and the desire to challenge and even escape those norms.

As the locus of political and cultural inscription as well as a means of responding to historical events, the symptomatic body plays a key role in the challenges to hegemonic GDR history presented by and in the prose texts investigated here—a history that is understood as encompassing both the official narratives propagated by the GDR government and the discourses about the GDR that circulate in unified Germany. As various historians and German Studies scholars have established, East German history has been predominantly constructed in ways that reinforce the image of the GDR as a dictatorship. This favored historiography promotes the development and preservation of a collective memory of the GDR along the lines of what Martin Sabrow has identified as the *Diktaturgedächtnis* (memory of the GDR as a dictatorship).<sup>39</sup> This memory discourse focuses exclusively on the antagonism between perpetrator and victim and on the oppressive character of the SED regime and the Stasi vis-à-vis the opposition's courage in 1989/90. It is grounded in the FRG's early founding narrative which collapsed the atrocities of the Nazi regime and Communist rule in the rhetoric of totalitarianism to justify the supremacy of the West German model of democracy.<sup>40</sup> Accordingly, discourses along the lines of the *Diktaturgedächtnis* exclusively interpret the GDR as an *Unrechtsstaat* (unconstitutional state; literally, a state in which the rule of law did not exist) or, influenced by the resurgence of the totalitarian paradigm, as a dictatorship comparable to Nazi Germany.<sup>41</sup> Modes of interpreting the GDR along the lines of the *Diktaturgedächtnis* dominate the media, official discourse, school textbooks, state-funded museums and memorials, and public commemorations in the Berlin Republic. They overshadow memories of the GDR that follow what has been termed the *Arrangementgedächtnis* (memory of accommodation) and the *Fortschrittsgedächtnis* (memory of progress).<sup>42</sup> The former focuses on quotidian life in the GDR and emphasizes the complexity of lived experiences of GDR citizens, while the latter adheres to socialist ideals and insists on socialism's legitimacy as an alternative to capitalism. These two forms of memory largely comprise the communicative memory of the

majority of former GDR citizens, which differs from the images propagated by the media as well as official memory.

This divergence points to a deep-seated lack of consensus about what the GDR was and how it should be remembered, and about what its place in national history and its significance for the construction of German national identity should be. The predominantly negative image of the GDR conveyed in discourses based on *Diktaturgedächtnis* devalues GDR biographies by staging East Germans as fundamentally different and deficient. It confirms the East-West division and the hegemony of West German elites. Yet the ongoing production and reception of literary works and films that revolve around and remember the GDR, as mentioned at the outset of this introduction, indicates a strong desire on the part of authors and filmmakers to influence collective views of the GDR. If their contributions disturb the *Diktaturgedächtnis*, their engagement may lead to a more nuanced understanding of the GDR. One of the aims of this study, then, is to reveal how the fictional texts under investigation and their representations of the historical reality of the GDR participate in promoting a particular image of the GDR; an image that may contribute to shaping the collective memory of the socialist country. Allowing us to read their embodied knowledge, symptomatic bodies can tell the untold stories of daily life as influenced by political events. If, for example, the body and its performance challenge the hegemonic social norms valid in the GDR society portrayed, such bodily acts need to be understood as rebellious. Whether they buttress notions of the *Diktaturgedächtnis* must be determined by careful analysis. After all, fictional texts may refrain from assuming a monolithic perspective and allow for a more contradictory image of the GDR by presenting, for example, a variety of individuals and diverging subject positions. Other symptomatic bodies may serve to affirm the depicted social and political environment in which an individual moves, and may consequently support interpretations of the GDR along the lines of the *Arrangementgedächtnis* or even the *Fortschrittsgedächtnis*. In other words, symptomatic bodies, which emerge as a site of social experience as well as potential resistance to political and social constraints and standards, are inherently political.

As stated before, the proliferation of symptomatic bodies and GDR-specific medical discourses in East German literature written before and after 1989 is conspicuous. Since this practice of defying social norms and indicating political upheaval continues after German unification, GDR literature can hardly be said to have ended in 1990. Yet the plurality of diverging, at times contradictory, ideas of what constitutes GDR literature is astonishing. The following overview of developments in East German literature is aimed in particular at readers who are not German Studies experts. It also provides the background for my understanding of GDR and post-GDR literature.

## Authors and Literature in the GDR

Positioned at the Cold War front, the two German states each developed master narratives, complemented by a biased image of their respective counterpart, to support their respective claims that they had drawn the right conclusions from the catastrophe of National Socialist rule. While Western propaganda collapsed Nazi terror and Communist dictatorship into the rhetoric of totalitarianism, the SED claimed that the GDR presented the only alternative to capitalism and National Socialism. The latter was considered an outgrowth of the imperialist capitalist system, a view that was vindicated by the FRG's "strong personal ties with the Third Reich," as Thomas Ahbe notes in "Competing Master Narratives" (222). These continuities in personnel led the GDR to declare the capitalist West the exclusive successor of National Socialism, while they positioned themselves as legitimate heir to the antifascist resistance to Nazi rule.<sup>43</sup> In other words, the SED legitimated its claims to power through the discourse of antifascism.

This ideological division was replicated in the cultural sphere. Jan Assmann's *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* (1992; *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, 2011) suggests that authors in all cultures participate in constructing the cultural memory fundamental for perpetuating a group identity (54). Yet GDR authorities took a noteworthy path by interfering in their writers' social function. From the start, the government supported its authors, many of whom were survivors of Nazi concentration camps or returning exiles—with the expectation that they imbue their literature with partisan political meaning. Since writers like Willi Bredel, Otto Gotsche, Anna Seghers, or Stefan Heym identified with the country, its ideology, and the underlying ideals, their writings reflected the attendant values and norms privileged by the state. Early GDR literature thus served as an effective means of educating citizens and of convincing them of the legitimacy of the socialist state. With their *Aufbauliteratur* (literature of socialist construction), these writers helped define GDR identity by developing modes of writing that engaged the GDR's founding narrative of antifascism by celebrating the Communist martyrdom of heroes of the antifascist resistance alongside the liberation by the Red Army. These early texts presented everyone who accepted the Soviet offer of redemption in the shape of socialist reeducation with the opportunity to associate discursively with either resistance or victimhood to National Socialism.

In *Post-Fascist Fantasies*, Julia Hell has examined the underlying model in detail. She reads the early GDR texts of *Aufbauliteratur* as "foundational narratives of antifascism."<sup>44</sup> They create fictional surrogate families organized around ideal communists who assume the role of symbolic parental figures whom the sons and daughters in the narrative can admire, and with whom young readers are solicited to identify (PFF,



107). Under fascist torture, the antifascist heroes suffered indescribable pain, which is inscribed in the body and at the same time leads to purification. This brought Hell to describe this “body-in-pain” (*PFF*, 33)—with reference to Slavoj Žižek—as “the *sublime body* of the communist hero of antifascism,” and as an asexual, “*post-fascist body*” (*PFF*, 19; italics in original). Hell traces how “in these novels, sexuality is defined as that part of subjectivity which links the subject to its fascist past, and the new [Communist] subject comes about as a result of the erasure of its material body, its sexual body” (*PFF*, 19). Accordingly, fascism is linked with sexuality and juxtaposed against communism, which is in turn linked with antifascism; with the antifascist, sublime and suffering body; with the absence of a sexual body; and with purity. The foundational GDR texts of *Aufbauliteratur*, their manner of narrating social relations as family relations and of placing suffering bodies center stage proved influential for the next generation of writers, those who were teenagers in 1945: the imaginary antifascist parental figures of *Aufbauliteratur* could take the place of their biological parents.

One of the writers influenced by early GDR literature, Christa Wolf, became the central figure of a generation of authors that emerged in the 1960s and had to position themselves vis-à-vis the “parent generation” of exiles and communist resistance fighters.<sup>45</sup> This generation, often identified today as “1929ers,”<sup>46</sup> was influenced by three decisive events: the experience of National Socialism and World War II as children and adolescents; the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961, which led to a more relaxed political atmosphere and societal modernization after the pressure of constant direct confrontation with the West had ceased;<sup>47</sup> and the experience of the infamous Eleventh Plenum of the Central Committee of the ruling SED in 1965, also known as the *Kahlschlag-Plenum* (clean-sweep plenum). At this party event, Erich Honecker, who later became the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the SED (1971–89), announced that skepticism and the development of socialism were mutually incompatible. His words officially put an end to any tendencies that he and his comrades associated with liberalism and the West, and justified the banning of numerous films and books. Honecker insisted on the artists’ commitment to a partisan approach to political and aesthetic evaluations of GDR reality; an approach that supported SED politics at all times.<sup>48</sup> When Christa Wolf spoke out against such demands, her status as potential member of the Central Committee of the SED was upended, but she became the canonical GDR writer. She was nationally and internationally celebrated and influential for decades, not least of all because her texts contravened Honecker’s orders in their ongoing struggle to negotiate notions of freedom and democratization in socialist society.<sup>49</sup>

After the Eleventh Plenum, dissenting intellectuals such as Christa Wolf, Heiner Müller, and Volker Braun faced a quandary: because of the



ties of the FRG elite to the fascist German past, the West did not present an alternative for most of them, which meant they could only advocate reforms of the GDR from within.<sup>50</sup> Convinced of the socialist ideals and often with ties to the administration, these loyal dissidents were still considered oppositional by the government.<sup>51</sup> They were kept under Stasi surveillance because they understood their prominent position as an obligation to pinpoint socialist values largely ignored in quotidian life, and to reflect on GDR society in the absence of a critical media presence. When this first generation of writers who came of age in the socialist state emerged in the 1960s, Germany saw the beginning of a discrete GDR literature. It developed both thematic and stylistic specificities, which, starting in 1967, were also acknowledged in the FRG as characteristic of a socialist literature.<sup>52</sup> In their fiction, authors like Christa Wolf negotiated societal controversies and cautiously took up official and unofficial discourses prevalent in society. And readers in the GDR, aware that books constituted the prime public space where differences of opinion were articulated, developed their competence in uncovering the relevant arguments.<sup>53</sup> Fictional discourses could therefore, in return, feed the societal discourses upon which they were built, a cycle that explains the constantly growing social significance of literature and of authors in the GDR.

By the 1970s, readers in the FRG, in contrast, lacked the knowledge about relevant societal discourses and quotidian life in the GDR, and were apparently largely unable to grasp the significance of these texts. In a letter to Lew Kopelew from 1973, Christa Wolf, for example, comments on West German reviews of *Nachdenken über Christa T.* She explains their superficiality and shallowness with the critics' ignorance about the essence of GDR life, particularly about the individual's conflictedness that arises from the experienced discrepancy between socialist ideals and the realities of daily life in socialism.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, in his preface to the 1974 edition of the West German standard work on GDR literature, Konrad Franke insists that Germans' shared history and language only give the appearance of a common ground shared by the literatures of the two German states.<sup>55</sup> Franke thus clearly contradicts West German claims that German cultural identity prevails over political changes affecting the nation. The political detachment on the national level, which started with the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961 and culminated in the second revision of the GDR constitution in 1974, is therefore reflected in literary history.<sup>56</sup> These developments in the political and the cultural spheres indicate that East German literature written since the 1960s, in particular, provides a unique window onto the empirical realities of life in the GDR. These narratives merit attention on the aesthetic and political levels: they develop specific and intriguing poetic strategies; moreover, they counter official GDR discourses and challenge hegemonic myths about the GDR that formed after unification. This study is situated at the intersection of

both levels as it concentrates on the poetic strategy of depicting symptomatic bodies in literature written after 1961: since the power structures underlying lived GDR reality are inscribed in these bodies, and since they reflect—and often participate in creating—the discourses that were most relevant in GDR society, in reading them we can identify how writers were coping with their everyday experiences by expressing political support or social critique.

## Abjecting the Other

The increasing separation of the two German literatures as well as the two German states culminated in two distinctly formed subject identities. Subject formation, according to Judith Butler's *Bodies That Matter*, relies on "the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet 'subjects,' but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject. . . . In this sense, then, the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, 'inside' the subject as its own founding repudiation" (3). If we understand that the two German states functioned as each other's "constitutive outside," then their "subject formation" emerges as relying precisely on abjecting the very parts the respective Other embraced in all realms of quotidian life. Dichotomies such as socialism/capitalism, planned economy/market economy, or community/individual represent values and norms that found their way into the respective literatures. Yet at the same time, the abjected outside remained inside the respective Other. It surfaced as influence on the other state, for example in the FRG's attempts to effect improvements in the social realm (e.g., by allocating resources for more comprehensive child care and by ensuring access to affordable if not free healthcare), or the GDR's constant efforts to raise the standard of living and improve the supply of consumer goods ranging from coffee to TVs.<sup>57</sup> Over forty years, the two German states developed distinct national identities that simultaneously separated and linked them.

Yet neither the FRG nor the GDR were, of course, homogenous, inclusive communities. Notwithstanding national discourses of inner unity, both German states featured internal hierarchies that developed—not unlike other nations—on the basis of categories such as gender, race, class, and sexuality. Yet the two German states each displayed additional, idiosyncratic features that were diametrically opposed to the other's norms: favored values such as solidarity versus self-interest, community versus individual freedom, the desire to belong to the working class versus the desire to belong to the middle class, or adherence to the party line—the most important factor in the GDR—versus economic status.<sup>58</sup> With the so-called *Wende* and unification, which from a Western point