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“The Wild East” in Contemporary German Poetry: Gerald Zschorsch, Kurt Drawert, Brigitte Oleschinski¹

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Abstract

This article discusses images of a “European” or “Wild” East in German poetry after 1989, specifically the work of Gerald Zschorsch, Kurt Drawert and Brigitte Oleschinski. Do their texts confirm or challenge a dichotomy with a long tradition in German and Western European thought, by juxtaposing “Germany” or “Europe” and this “East”, or by aesthetically transcending such a dichotomy? How do their aesthetics open perspectives on inter- or transcultural movement beyond existing ideas of regional, national and European identities in an increasingly globalized world? Focusing on place, space and movement, the article addresses Centre-Periphery dynamics from a new angle. While there has been a growing body of research on narrative texts in contemporary German “migrant literature” offering transcultural perspectives on ideas of “East” and “West”, poetry – particularly of non-migrant writers – has been largely overlooked here, despite its potential for transcending boundaries through language because of its complex aesthetics.

Keywords: Europe; East; movement; transcultural; intercultural; image; genre boundaries; centre/periphery; German poetry

When looking at contemporary German writing, the cultural borders of “the East” emerging in it seem to vary: in some texts it encompasses former East Germany, in others it begins behind the current political borders between Germany and Poland, or further beyond, in Russia. In German literature and literary criticism, where ideas of “East” and “West” were primarily discussed as a German-German issue after 1989, a European or, in a wider sense, transnational perspective on this has been a more recent phenomenon than in other Central

¹ For a paper in German, looking at aspects of this contribution within a focus on intermedial crossings between word, image and sound in literature and the new media, see Sabine Egger: ‘Bilder des europäischen Ostens in der neueren deutschen Lyrik’. In: Carsten Gansel and Monika Wolting (eds.): *Deutschland- und Polenbilder in der Literatur nach 1989* (Deutschsprachige Gegenwartsliteratur und Medien 16). Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht unipress, 2015, p. 103-122.

and Eastern European writing.² What tends to be labelled as German-speaking “migrant literature”, and has been characterized by multi-ethnic themes, transnational subjects and spaces at least since the 1960s, would obviously contradict such a statement. However, the categorization of texts by “migrant writers” whose first language is not German as a specific subgenre might be one of the reasons for the delay diagnosed above concerning greater parts of the German literary canon.³ The poems by Gerald Zschorsch, Kurt Drawert and Brigitte Oleschinski, discussed in the following, are, on the other hand, examples of a growing number of texts in contemporary German literature which do reflect on images of Self and Other and questions of identity in a European and global context. All three writers discussed here were born in the 1950s. While Zschorsch and Drawert share an East German, post-communist biography, which links them to other Central and Eastern European authors concerned with the European East, such as Ilma Rakusa, Herta Müller, Andrzej Stasiuk or Milan Kundera, this does not apply to Oleschinski. However, for all three of them movement between East and West has been part of their biography, even if not in a sense which would make them “migrant writers”. Despite their work differing profoundly in many respects, all three refer to a “European” or “Wild” East to define themselves culturally as individuals and as Germans, Europeans or global citizens after the end of the Cold War. How do their texts, written a decade or two after the Fall of the Wall, confirm or challenge a dichotomy with a long tradition in German and western European thought, either by juxtaposing “Germany” or “Europe” and this “East”, and drawing on a frontier myth reminiscent of the American “West”, or by aesthetically transcending such a dichotomy? To what extent could perspectives emerging in this writing be called transcultural?

My analysis draws on concepts developed in the field of imagology, while focusing on the aesthetic function of images in particular texts, thus taking them beyond a traditional intercultural perspective. This is partly based on Jean-Marc Moura’s and Daniel-Henri Pageaux’s redefinition of terms such as “image” of the Other and “stereotype” in the

² Kurt Drawert: *Rückseiten der Herrlichkeit. Texte und Kontexte*. Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 2001, p. 48f.; for an overview of the debate on “Central Europe” in European literatures in the 1980s, see Paul Michael Lützeler: *Die Schriftsteller und Europa. Von der Romantik bis zur Gegenwart*. Zürich: Piper, 1992, p. 444-452. For trends in contemporary German poetry: Karen Leeder: ‘Introduction. “Schreiben am Schnittpunkt”: The Place of Contemporary German Poetry’. In: Karen Leeder (ed.): *Schaltstelle: Neue deutsche Lyrik im Dialog*. Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2007, p. 1-30.

³ On “migrant writing”, see Carmine Chiellino (ed.): *Interkulturelle Literatur in Deutschland*. Stuttgart: Metzler, 2000. Cf. Saša Stanišić: ‘Wie ihr uns seht. Über drei Mythen vom Schreiben der Migranten’. In: Uwe Pörksen and Bernd Busch (eds.): *Eingezogen in die Sprache, angekommen in der Literatur*. Göttingen: Wallstein, 2008, p. 104-110, or Chantal Wright: Writing in the “Grey Zone”. *Exophonic Literature in Contemporary Germany*. In: *gfl* 3 (2008), p. 26-42

framework of a cultural “imaginaire” informed by Paul Ricœur’s hermeneutics.⁴ It allows for the questioning of existing notions of alterity, also by means of transcultural perspectives and concepts of movement, with regard to both content and, in particular, the form of the texts analysed. At the same time, literature is understood here as one particular manifestation of culture among others. Images of Self and Other, which dominate public discourse, and manifest themselves in different ways in printed and electronic mass media, films, or political publications, can also be found in literary texts. While these might have a smaller readership, they are of particular interest in this context from an aesthetic and cultural point of view, because literature can be understood as an “elaborierter Interdiskurs”, as Jürgen Link has shown, which “tendenziell alle Diskurse einer Kultur konnotativ reintegriert”.⁵ Such “reintegration” includes a potentially higher level of reflection and deconstruction of discourses, not least on the level of language, and the development of new perspectives. This applies to an even greater extent to the genre of poetry, because of its complex use of language.⁶

The discussion of images of a “European” or “Wild” East in literary – and other – German discourses is perhaps of special interest in the context of the current EU-crisis, which has led to a growing disinterest in the idea of an economically, politically and culturally “United Europe”. After all, the latter enjoyed broad support in post-war Germany, and played a significant role in its attitude to the EU’s eastern expansion in 2004, in the course of the rediscovery of an older East Central Europe after the Iron Curtain had lifted. Euroscepticism has now reached an unprecedented high in Germany, together with nationalism resurfacing, even if not to the same level as, for example, in Denmark, Hungary or France, and an increasingly open display of xenophobic attitudes towards Turkish, Polish and Russian migrants in public and media discourses. Stereotypes of an uncivilised “Wild East” can be read both as a reflexion and a constituent of such attitudes. At the same time, the othering of the East also informs dominant concepts of Europe. For the majority of Germans their

⁴ [imagination], Daniel-Henri Pageaux: *Littératures et cultures en dialogue*. Paris: L’Harmattan, 2007, p. 27. See also: Jean-Marc Moura: L’imagologie littéraire, essai de mise au point historique et critique. In: *Revue de Littérature Comparée* 263/66, juillet-septembre, 3 (1992), p. 271-287. Hugo Dyserinck’s constructivist approach has been of equal importance to this shift in image studies. For an overview, see Joep Leerssen: ‘Imagology. History and Method’. In: Manfred Beller and Joep Leerssen (eds.): *Imagology: The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters*. A Critical Survey (Studia Imagologica 13). Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2007, p. 17-32.

⁵ [elaborate interdiscourse]; [tends to reintegrate all discourses in a culture connotatively], Jürgen Link: ‘Über ein Modell synchroner Systeme von Kollektivsymbolen sowie seine Rolle bei der Diskurs-Konstitution’. In: Jürgen Link and Wolf Wülfing (eds.): *Bewegung und Stillstand in Metaphern und Mythen*. Stuttgart: Klett, 1984, p. 63-92, p. 65).

⁶ Tom Furniss and Michael Bath: *Reading Poetry: An Introduction*. 2nd ed. Edinburgh: Pearson Education, 1996.

national identity is, despite all Euroscepticism, firmly located in a Western European context – with the East providing the Other against which to define oneself also on this level. When looking at how such concepts of alterity are rooted in the existing language, even political discourses promoting cultural dialogue between Germany and other Western or Central European EU member states with their “Eastern neighbours”, seem to further confirm them.⁷ This East-West dichotomy has been central to concepts of European identity since the Middle Ages, and German cultural discourses have largely participated in these. Within such a framework, not only Asia, but also what in geographical terms would constitute the European East, appears as a Slavic, semi-Asiatic, semi-Oriental Other of European civilisation. In the 19th, and even more so in the 20th century, Eastern otherness has at times included Poland and other East Central European countries, marked by their wild or sensual “Slavonic” soul, with this quality seen in a negative or positive light. In contrast to an occidental and modernist Europe as a cultural entity, the timeless, quasi mythical, or depending on its evaluation, backward, East has been represented by its wild Cossacks and open plains, or as in Rilke’s Russia, appeared as a land of icons, characterised by its faith, its devoted and sensual women. Such images draw on a frontier myth which gained prominence in the course of the 19th century. The “othering” of the East,⁸ which reached its nadir during National Socialism, continued in public discourse in post-war West Germany.⁹ The same applies to some extent to perceptions in the GDR, outside the official political discourse.¹⁰ It can thus not be explained by the political division of Europe along the lines of two opposing systems in the twentieth century, even though this further deepened the existing cultural dichotomy and added a political dimension.

Gerald Zschorsch’s prose poem *Czerwonka* (2006) is based on the author’s impressions from his travels in the 1990s to the Polish, Lithuanian and Russian parts of the former East Prussia, which constituted a major portion of the “German East” until 1945. The poem evokes wide

⁷ Merje Kuus: Europe’s Eastern Expansion and the Reinscription of Otherness in East-Central Europe. In: *Progress in Human Geography* 28/4 (2004) p. 472-489

⁸ Kuus, Europe’s Eastern Expansion, p. 473.

⁹ Cf. Michael Schornstheimer: “Die verschlagenen Augen der Polen” – Kriegserlebnisse und Kriegsdeutung in den Fortsetzungsromanen von Quick und Stern in den fünfziger Jahren?. In: Ursula Heukenkamp (ed.): *Schuld und Sühne? Kriegserlebnisse und Kriegsdeutung in deutschen Medien der Nachkriegszeit (1945-1961)*. Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2001, p. 733-742; Larry Wolff: ‘Die Erfindung Osteuropas: Von Voltaire zu Voldemort’. In: Karl Kaser et al. (eds.): *Europa und die Grenzen im Kopf* (Wieser Enzyklopädie des europäischen Ostens 11). Klagenfurt: Wieser, 2003, p. 21-34.

¹⁰ Cf. Thomas C. Fox: Imagining Eastern Europe in East German Literature. In: Keith Bullivant et al. (eds.): *Germany and Eastern Europe: Cultural Identities and Cultural Differences* (Yearbook of European Studies 13). Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 1999, p. 284-303, p. 294-300.

open landscapes in which nature rises triumphantly and endlessly: a counter-world to the Western civilisation dominated by consumerism.

Es sind niedere, tief gestaffelte Himmel mit Kumulus-, Quell-, Turm-, und Schäfchenwolken. Ganz oben aber, wo diese Himmel das Firmament berühren, leuchten nachts die hellsten Sterne der Welt.

*Nord/Nordost, Masuren/Warmia.*¹¹

Places are invoked by their old German and new Slavonic and Baltic names:

Olsztyn/Allenstein, Biskupiec/Bischofsburg. The lonely poet-wanderer moves through a landscape which transforms into a "Mythologie des Ostens", a transcendental experience of nature, in which physical borders dissolve.¹² At the same time, this renders somewhat insignificant the landscape's historical dimension, thus distancing it from Johannes Bobrowski's Sarmatia as a potential model of this "Masuren/Warmia".¹³ In Zschorsch's *Czerwonka* the colonialist legacy of the Teutonic Knights in Eastern Europe merges harmonically with other geographical features: "Kreuzritterland, Kulturland, Osten und Geographie der Ausdehnung: Länge, Breite, Höhe".¹⁴ The only human traces interfering in this process are those of the shabby everyday life of Polish and Russian inhabitants: "Am Ortsrand liegt aufgelassen ein Bus im Graben, und ein Schwein zernagt das Lenkrad."¹⁵ This also applies to their buildings:

¹¹ [These are heavy, deep skies, staggered with welling, towering and fleecy cumulus clouds. But way up, where these skies touch the firmament, they are lit with the brightest stars in the world. North/North East, Masuria/Warmia.], Gerald Zschorsch: *Czerwonka*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2006, p. 9. Cited subsequently as CZ.

¹² [mythology of the East], CZ, p. 27.

¹³ In a review of *Czerwonka* Adrian Kasnitz points to the link with Bobrowski (Adrian Kasnitz: Wer sich täuschen lässt. Ein ermländisches Prosagedicht von Gerald Zschorsch. In: *Poetenladen*, 10. 03.2007, accessed on 16.02.2013 on <http://www.poetenladen.de/adrian-kasnitz-gerald-zschorsch.htm>). In his collection of poems, *Sarmatische Zeit* (Sarmatian Time, 1961), the East German Johannes Bobrowski addresses the common history of the Germans and their "Eastern neighbours". His Sarmatian landscapes contain memories of his childhood in a multicultural East Prussia and of the crimes committed against members of other ethnic groups by Germans during National Socialism, including himself as a German soldier. He traces this history of German guilt toward their Eastern neighbours back to the colonisation of the East by the Teutonic Knights. This, as well as the inclusion of the Eastern Orthodox Church and Chassidism in his "europäischen Osten", together with the music of Buxtehude, challenges images with a long tradition in Western European thought, and makes his poems stand out within West and East German post-war poetry. At the same time, also in his texts, the East is juxtaposed with "the Germans", thus continuing the dichotomy of East and West on this level.

¹⁴ [Land of the Teutonic Knights, cultivated land, the East and geography of expansion: length, width, altitude], CZ, p. 12.

¹⁵ [At the edge of the village a bus is lying in the ditch, doors missing, and a pig is gnawing away on the steering wheel.], CZ, p. 17.

In Lukta/Locken, einer Anhäufung von Häusern, Magazinen und Buden, schlägt gar keine Zeit mehr. Der Ort scheint verlassen, und nur am Markt stehen Rotköpfe und trinken und pissen in die Bushaltestelle.¹⁶

Timelessness suddenly becomes something negative. The village inhabitants appear archaic, but, in contrast to the remnants of older German buildings, they do not harmonise with the surrounding nature.¹⁷ Stalinism seems to have inflicted more damage here than the older German colonisation and occupation in the Second World War:

Russischer Beton verbreitet Trostlosigkeit. Die überschaubare Dauer eines halben Jahrhunderts slawischer Diktatur ergibt in der Siedlungsgeschichte dieser Geographie wenig Sinn, und doch plaziert sie ihr die tiefsten Schmissee auf.¹⁸

To some extent, this can be explained by the author's biography. He is born in 1951 in the East German Thuringia, into a strongly communist family. His father, persecuted and imprisoned in a concentration camp under the Nazis, enters the diplomatic service in the new Socialist state. While he and his wife do everything to make a good GDR citizen out of their son, the young Zschorsch's ideal of Socialism with a human face clashes with the official party line. As a seventeen-year-old he is put into youth custody after protesting openly against the Soviet invasion which ended the Prague Spring, and remains a political prisoner from 1968 to 1974, when he is expatriated. He settles down in Frankfurt, begins a friendship with the Socialist student leader Rudi Dutschke and publishes poems which starkly depict the social injustice he finds in his new surroundings. While he is nominated for the prestigious Ingeborg Bachmann Prize in 1982, he remains somewhat of an outsider to the West German literary scene, and to an increasingly postmodern poetry turning away from social criticism.

At the same time, the ruins of Stalinism in *Czerwonka* mirror the memories of the Polish author Artur Becker, who wrote the afterword for Zschorsch's book. In it Becker recalls his encounter with Zschorsch in the Cracow "Cafe Europejska" after Poland has joined the EU, and how the German asked him to show him his country: "Der Deutsche wollte reisen und sich von einem, der in diesem Land geboren worden und aufgewachsen war, Polen zeigen

¹⁶ [In Lukta/Locken, an accumulation of houses, warehouses and kiosks, time has come to a complete standstill. The village seems deserted, only at the marketplace some redheads are standing around, drinking and pissing into the bus stop], CZ, p.15.

¹⁷ "In Allenstein, der Bezirkshauptstadt, ist im Stadtzentrum die Zeit stehengeblieben. Deutsche Bauästhetik wird von russischen Plattensiedlungen bedrängt und abgeschirmt." [In the centre of Allenstein, the regional capital, time has come to a standstill. German architectural aesthetics is squeezed by Russian prefab housing estates], CZ, p. 14.

¹⁸ [Russian concrete spreads hopelessness. The short duration of half a century of Slavonic dictatorship does not make much sense in the settlement history of this geography, but has still left the deepest scars in it], CZ, p. 18.

lassen. Er konnte sich unter Warmia und Masuren nichts vorstellen".¹⁹ Becker's childhood memories are those of a shabby village of the 1970s, where his father is the manager of a Socialist holiday camp. The archaic nature of the place is the sad result of neglect, due to both of his parents having an alcohol problem. Becker's afterword thus provides a frame for the German's poem, subverting the dreamlike and timeless character of the visitor's mythical counter-world to the West, making it concrete and profane. By this, *Czerwonka* is turned into an inter-, or perhaps even transcultural, dialogue and, at the same time, a heterotopia in Michel Foucault's sense.²⁰ This puts a different light on Zschorsch's negative portrayal of the eastern "redheads" in *Czerwonka*, moving his "wild East" beyond a simple dichotomy, even more so when read in the greater context of his oeuvre: The Stalinist architecture and its inhabitants recalls the Western urban culture in *Stadthunde* (1986) and many of his earlier poems. In these the city is taken in laconic, sharp images as a place of elementary power relations, often violent and of a sexual nature – like the everyday life in the new Europe, which he finds in the exploitation of Eastern European women for prostitution in "Grenzpuppen" [border dolls] of 2004.²¹

In "Die Engel der Landstraße" [The Angels of the Country Road] Kurt Drawert also takes prostitution as a metaphor for the relationship between the inhabitants of the New and Old Europe: They are "die Frauen auf der E55 / der Hauptstadt Europas / und des Erbarmens".²² "Generalsekretäre und Direktoren" from the Western side of the border, who exploit their poorer Eastern neighbours, embody the New Europe as a field of capitalist globalisation.²³ Like in the other twelve poems in Drawert's book *Frühjahrskollektion* [spring collection] of 2002 which deal with the European East, the latter is caught in a different time, economically, politically and culturally. East Germany, on the other hand, is given "Zwischenstatus", "von

¹⁹ [The German wanted to travel, and be guided through Poland by someone who was born and grew up in this country. He had no idea of Warmia and Masuria], Artur Becker: *Chmury*. In: CZ, p. 35-45, p. 41.

²⁰ Michel Foucault: *Die Heterotopien/Der utopische Körper*. Zwei Radiovorträge, bilingual edition, transl. by Michael Bischoff. Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 2005. Becker refers to this process in his afterword: "Um meine Aufregung zu verbergen, erzählte ich dem Deutschen Geschichten aus Warmia und dem Sozialismus made in Poland. Er hörte mir zu, und ich wußte nur eines: Sobald er die Wälder und die Hunderte[n] von Seen und vor allen Dingen den Himmel über ihnen erblickte, würde er meinen Geschichten kein Gehör mehr schenken" [To hide my excitement, I told the German stories of Warmia and of the Socialism "made in Poland". He listened to me, and I knew only one thing: As soon as he would see the hundreds of lakes and, most of all, the sky over them, he would no longer listen to my stories], CZ, p. 42.

²¹ "Der Nagellack changiert, / und das Schambein preßt / gegen die fremde Hand, / mit Hast. Halt schnell: so./ Der Fingergrenzverkehr / zwischen Raute und Po" [the nail polish is oscillating. / and the pubic bone is pressing / against the strange hand, / in a haste. Stop quickly: so. / The finger's border traffic between diamond and bottom], Gerald Zschorsch: *Torhäuser des Glücks. Die Gedichte*, Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 2004, p. 421.

²² [the women on the E55 / the capital of Europe / and of mercy], Kurt Drawert: *Frühjahrskollektion. Gedichte*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 2002, p. 55-56, p. 55. Cited subsequently as FK.

²³ [general secretaries and directors], FK, p. 55.

Osteuropa getrennt, ohne schon Westeuropa zu sein”, as the writer explains in an essay.²⁴ Impressions from travels to Poland and Russia undertaken in the 1990s, together with historical and intertextual references create a complex picture of reality, while questioning stereotypes and the subject’s perception as such. Explorations of the author’s everyday life in a German suburb and of journeys to places conventionally associated with European high culture, such as the Rome of German classicism, or the France of Hölderlin and Victor Hugo, provide the context to these twelve poems.

They can thus be read as a positioning of the author in the Europe he finds himself in after 1990, his attempt to overcome an existential sense of disorientation. Drawert, born 1956 in Brandenburg outside Berlin, moves to West Germany after the Fall of the Wall. In his 1993 poem “Ortswechsel” he addresses the acute sense of uprootedness following this “change of place”, as the title translates: “Meine Freunde im Osten / verstehe ich / nicht mehr, im Landstrich zwischen Hamme und Weser / kenne ich keinen.”²⁵ Somebody he does identify with is the Polish poet and friend “Zbigniew Herbert” (2002), whose name is the title of a poetic obituary. Like Drawert, he is a deserter from real-existing Socialism, and a restless soul between the worlds of the European literary market after 1989:

Wir trafen uns in einem Supermarkt kurz
Vor der Kasse, zeitgleich stipendienverpflichtet
Und Hüter eines vornehmen Hauses höherer Künste.

Er im wehenden Sommermantel mit dem Duft
Von Paris, oder wo immer er herkam, in jenem Winter.
Ein Ruheloser zwischen den Welten [...] ²⁶

“Doch alles war Polen” for his friend Herbert, as the poem goes on, who was on the road westward on the map, “und alles ein faulender Giebel im Auswurf // schießender Tauben. Denn er war uns im Kopf, / der Osten, dieser Krieg der Sprache gegen die Sprache, / dieses schreckliche Volksstück der Vormoderne.”²⁷ The Europe of the Cold War is contrasted with the modern Europe as an unlimited space of culture and free market enterprise. The “pre-modern” experience of life as a writer under communism has marked both writers’

²⁴ [a status in-between; separated from Eastern Europe, but without being Western Europe either], Drawert, *Rückseiten der Herrlichkeit*, p. 22.

²⁵ [My friends in the East / I no longer understand / in the region between Hamme und Weser / I don’t know anybody], Kurt Drawert: *Ortswechsel*. In: *ndl* 41/7 (1993), p. 24-26, p. 24.

²⁶ [We met briefly in a supermarket / In front of the cash register, simultaneously enlisted in scholarships / And keepers of high-minded houses of fine arts. // He in a flowing summer coat with the scent / of Paris, or wherever he was coming from, that winter. / Restless between the worlds], FK, p.52-53, p. 52.

²⁷ [But everything was Poland / and everything a rotting gable // exposed to shitting pigeons. Because it was in our heads, / this East, this war of languages, / this awful pre-modern folk play], FK, p. 53.

perspective on the present and the past. Their speechlessness might have been caused by the suppression of free speech under communist rule, but it continues in the New Europe, due to the role of media in the presentation of reality. Both lead, according to Drawert, to the inadequacy of signs and meaning, thus to the abolition of reality, as he writes in an essay in 1996.²⁸ In his *Spring Collection* reality is reflected as a construct, as part of a journey in which the author struggles for authenticity.

The stereotypical image of an "östlichen Steppe" is exposed as such in a number of his poems, and put into its historical context. In "Polen in Briefen – und wie geht es in Deutschland?" the speaker is a young West German tourist – for whom everything beyond the German-Polish border merges into an archaic, backward East, into plains "so hart an Sibirien", as he writes home.²⁹ His words echo those of a German soldier, moving East during the Second World War.³⁰ In another poem, with the title "Fliegen", the speaker seems to reach a place outside time, located "am Ende der Welt in einem Grenzort / zwischen Rußland und Jetztzeit".³¹ However, this place the speaker travels to on the Trans-Siberian Railway, offers no escape from reality, but a view on the barbarity of European history.³²

In order to reach an East, which is at the same time a place of European history and an "Abwesenheitsraum" for which no language exists anymore, and for which the subject has to find a new language and identity, the poet does not have to travel to the Urals, but can find it already in the no-man's land of the German-Czech border or even further west.³³ These are spaces where "sich Zeit und Geschwindigkeit scheinbar auf einer anderen Achse und in eine andere Richtung bewegen, in denen alles in Frage gestellt ist [...], Abwesenheitsräume, für die

²⁸ Kurt Drawert: Abschaffung der Wirklichkeit. In: Kurt Drawert: *Wo es war*. Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 1996, p. 117-121.

²⁹ [Eastern steppe]; [Poland in letters – and how are things in Germany?]; [so close to Siberia]

³⁰ "Es hat mich schon immer gewundert, / was Fliegen auf einer Kotlache suchen, / Mutter / und auch sonst wenig Neues. // Die Männer sind tot bis zum Morgen, Polen in Polen finde ich nicht, // und nach Auschwitz kommt man jetzt günstig / in Gruppe und mit dem Sondersparticket" [I always wondered / what flies are looking for on a pool of excrement, / mother / and apart from this also nothing new. // The men are dead until the morning, I cannot find Poland in Poland // and travel to Auschwitz has become cheap / as a group and with the Special Discount Ticket], FK, p. 58.

³¹ [flies]; [at the end of the world in a border town / between Russia and now], FK, p. 47.

³² Such perspectives on European history open up to the speaker travelling eastward in a number of the poems in FK. In "Transsib. Trauma. Dante" this process is further explored: "Jeder Handgriff ist Ewigkeit, jedes Wort / eine Folge von Kriegen. Mit Blick auf eine Uhr, / der die Zeiger fehlen, und im Rhythmus / mitgezählter Schienenschläge, so geht die Fahrt / jetzt im Rückwärtsgang weiter, die Zeitzonen / abwärts, dorthin, wo die toten Schuldigen leben" [Every move is eternity, every word / a series of wars. With a look on the watch / its hands missing, and in the rhythm / of the train's trackbeats, counted along, the journey goes / now in reverse, down the time zones, / to the place where the guilty dead live], FK, p. 45-46.

³³ [space of absence], Drawert, *Rückseiten der Herrlichkeit*, p. 24. Space can be understood here as something the subject structures through its own movement (cf. Michel de Certeau: *The Practice of Everyday Life*, transl. by Steven Rendall. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1984).

es keine Sprache mehr gibt". The otherness of such spaces is a precondition for Drawert's writing, who follows in Friedrich Hölderlin's footsteps in this regard. Despite the obvious differences between their poetics, for both Zschorsch and Drawert the East is a concrete place and, at the same time, the space of an existential search for meaning. It marks an existential homelessness at the turn of the century, when the political bipolarity of communism and capitalism, which provided a political, economic and cultural framework for much of the 20th century, no longer exists in this form.

"Gedichte [...] gehen über Grenzen, von denen ich nicht weiß, ob ich sie überqueren kann", Brigitte Oleschinski writes in a poetological text in 2002.³⁴ Some of her earlier work, inspired by the author's travels after 1989, is located in East German and Polish landscapes. Her poems literally "buzz and crackle with the minute vibrations of particular places", but their focus on a particular environment paradoxically opens up a space for a global communication, as Cheryl Dueck shows in her essay.³⁵ Unlike everyday language, the poems themselves have agency (in a Foucauldian sense), to make connections as a "language between languages, thinking between cultures".³⁶ The author understands poetry not as a subjective genre, and argues that it is instead the most general form akin to mathematics or music. Agency is shifted from the poet to the poem. The poet puts words next to each other in a new way, and these begin to communicate with each other in unexpected ways, creating new levels of meaning, making the poet – like the reader – their audience.

The East also plays a role in Oleschinski's biography. Her father's family came from Upper Silesia, hence the Slavic name, and settled in Cologne after the war, where she was born in 1955. She moved to West Berlin to study Political Science at the Free University, specialising on questions of state control over individuals in her later research.³⁷ Her first volume of poetry, *Mental Heat Control* is published in 1990, the year of German unification. For *Your Passport is not Guilty* of 1997, she is awarded two literary awards.³⁸ The fact that both of the original titles are, unlike the poems inside, in English reflects her attitude to poetic language

³⁴ Poems [...] transcend borders I am not sure, if I can cross them (Brigitte Oleschinski: *Reizstrom in Aspik. Wie Gedichte Denken*. Ein Poetik-Projekt mit Urs Engeler, Cologne: DuMont, 2002, p. 35.

³⁵ Cheryl Dueck: 'Global Cargo in the Poetry of Brigitte Oleschinski'. In Karen Leeder (ed.): *Schaltstelle: Neue deutsche Lyrik im Dialog* (German Monitor 69), Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2007: p. 385-408, p. 385.

³⁶ Brigitte Oleschinski: 'Die Plejaden on MTV'. In: Joachim Sartorius: *Minima Poetica. Für eine Poetik des zeitgenössischen Gedichts*. Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1999, p. 93.

³⁷ 1993 she completes her PhD with a thesis on the history of pastoral care for prisoners in the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich. The object of her later research were prison camps in the Soviet Zone of Occupation and she co-founded an information and documentation research centre in Torgau, site of Soviet special camps (Dueck, 'Poetry of Brigitte Oleschinski', p. 386).

³⁸ Incentive Award of the Bremen Literary Prize and the Peter Huchel Prize.

as "die allgemeinste Form".³⁹ Her more recent work includes short prose and poetry volumes, experimental works with other artists, such as Durs Grünbein or Peter Waterhouse,⁴⁰ and an interactive digital "poetics project", *Reizstrom in Aspik*.⁴¹ Her distinctively hybrid style of postmodern collage distinguishes her from her East German colleagues, who have tended to hold on to an existential "I" as the subject of their poems.

The fluid cellular structure of Oleschinski's poetic language acknowledges the multiple layers of identity in the poetic subject. This is partly achieved through grammatical dissonance, such as the pairing of a first person subject with a third person verb form: "I is" "I wanders", or the grammatical subject is completely lacking. And, like other boundaries in her texts, the contours of the physical body, the body of the poem ("Gedichtkörper") and the physical setting are often so hybrid as to be indistinguishable.⁴² In "Einschlüsse von Regen" in *Mental Heat Control*, which reflects on the impossibility of going home, a water overflow becomes the mouth of a speaker, with a liquid sense of longing flowing through it:⁴³

Die unermüdeten Farben der Zähne, ausgeschwemmt
von der strömenden Sehnsucht nach Heimkehr
in kein Land. Zurück bleibt ein durchsichtiges Gestein,
umschlossen von Gaumengewölbe, eine niedrige
Mauer aus Stümpfen von klarem Harz.⁴⁴

On the one hand, the universality of the body/landscape metaphor makes it a universal experience of homelessness. On the other, intertextual and historical references create links to specific historical landscapes. The phrase "Sehnsucht nach Heimkehr / in kein Land" in the second part indicates a sense of exile felt by East Germans after unification or refugees from the East after the Second World War.⁴⁵ Such home- or placelessness is caused by the loss of memory of once familiar places: in the following lines memory is "eine Pfütze / in der

³⁹ [most general form], Brigitte Oleschinski in an unpublished interview with Cheryl Dueck, quoted in Dueck, 'Poetry of Brigitte Oleschinski', p. 385.

⁴⁰ Die Schweizer Korrektur (1995), described as a poetic "Partitur" [score] by a reviewer in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* on 7.11.1995.

⁴¹ Brigitte Oleschinski, *Reizstrom in Aspik*. Another interactive project is www.neuedichte.de (2003/2004). Her most recent publications include *Argo Cargo* (2003) and her long poem *Geisterströmung* (2004), for which she was awarded the Erich Fried Prize.

⁴² Oleschinski explains: "Ich bin bei vielen Landschaften gar nicht sicher, ob es überhaupt Landschaften sind. Ich bin auch bei Personen nicht sicher, ob es Personen sind. Manchmal sind die Personen eigentlich Landschaften und umgekehrt" [With regard to many landscapes, I am not even sure, if they are landscapes. I am not sure either, if persons are persons. Sometimes, the persons are actually landscapes and vice versa.], Dueck, 'Poetry of Brigitte Oleschinski', p. 389.

⁴³ [Inclusions of rain]

⁴⁴ [The untired colours of the teeth, washed out / by the stream of longing for a return home / to no country. What stays behind is a transparent type of rock, / enclosed by the vault of the palate, a low / wall of stumps of clear resin.], Brigitte Oleschinski: *Mental Heat Control. Gedichte*. Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1990, p. 23.

⁴⁵ [Longing for returning / to no country]

wodkadurchspülten Grotte” and “eine Kathedrale mit aufgehobenem Dach”.⁴⁶ Both images stress the physical and spatial dimension of memory. The cathedral line, a quotation from Andrei Tarkovsky’s Film *Nostalghia* (1983), as well as “vodka“ sketch out a historical space containing both Eastern and Western Europe, while at the same time expanding it further to the human experience of migration, or an even broader sense of homeless wandering. By means of constantly changing perspectives and links emerging in the course of the poem, voices, images and lexical units turn into connection points for physical sensations, emotions and fragments of memory which cannot be assigned to a particular individual or culture. The reader’s attention shifts from the search for a speaking subject to these connection points and movements, and it is in this process that the poem emerges as a figuration. The text itself “achieves an agency”.⁴⁷ Evoking an in-between, a sense of floating between the body and the mind, body and landscape, body and history, at the same time the poem directs the reader’s attention to such boundaries, both physical and cultural.

This also applies to the process of coming to terms with the recent German past in her second volume, *Your Passport is Not Guilty* (1997), which consists of four parts, the titles of which suggest different dimensions of separation or disintegration:

I. “Zweikomponentenleuchtstoff”; II. “Dauernd gespalten bleiben”; III. “Your passport is not guilty”; IV. “Augen-, Flügel-, Zehenpixel”.⁴⁸ In the second part ugly and banal places and objects, neglected parking lots and derelict houses, overgrown by shrubs, in and around the Eastern part of Berlin, gain their own beauty, and become the setting for human encounters.⁴⁹ In part III, “Your passport is not guilty”, the geographical focus widens across the Polish border, thus locating national history in an Eastern European context, while such historical and geopolitical categories are questioned: The title already plays with the limits of language and perception: the “guilty” in the title is a linguistic *false friend*: Contrary to the German-speaking reader’s expectation, having read the first four words, the German translation of the fifth one is not “gültig“, i.e. valid, but “schuldig”. This creates a tension, because the “false” translation “gültig” seems more logical than the correct one. Indirectly the adjective thus points to the passport’s function of proving a person’s national identity. A person, on the other hand, cannot be invalid, but, depending on the passport, share a collective guilt. The

⁴⁶ [a puddle / in the grotto flooded by vodka]; [a cathedral with an uplifted roof]

⁴⁷ Dueck, ‘Poetry of Brigitte Oleschinski’, p. 390.

⁴⁸ [I. Two-component-fluorescent substance; II. Continuously remaining split; IV. Pixels of eyes, wings, toes], Brigitte Oleschinski: *Your Passport is Not Guilty*. Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1997. Cited subsequently as PP.

⁴⁹ “Dann sind wir angeschlossen//an ein mattgrünes Lämpchen, nachts, in einer Parkbucht unter den Abschlepp-/kränen, von spärlichem Regen beleuchtet” [Then we are connected // to a pale green light, at night, in a parking bay under the salvage / cranes, illuminated by sparse rain], PP, p. 9.

meaning of the title line thus begins to run backwards and forwards, producing a virtual network of meaning between the poles "passport" und "guilty", and thus also between nationality and guilt. Directly translated the whole sentence, "Your passport is not guilty", suggests that nationality is not responsible for the behaviour by or toward its holder, whereas the translation according to the sound of "guilty" to "gültig" means that the holder cannot prove his or her own national identity, and is prevented from entering a different national space. The latter reflects the situation of many Poles before 2004, which persists for those from states further east.

The subject of collective and individual responsibility for historical events is implicit in many of the poems. Oleschinski has stressed the importance of her "nachgeborene[n] Trauma" as member of a generation whose childhood in post-war West Germany was marked at first by the silence about the Nazi past, and then the process of coming to terms with it. The cataclysm of the Holocaust, and the German invasion of the East as part of this "Zivilisationsbruch", was a defining marker of this group's identity, at least until German unification.⁵⁰ Apparently insignificant objects, like the „rear window wire“, coming into view when refuelling the car at a petrol station "Heckscheibendrähte[]" take on a different meaning in connection with "Tankflügel-/stutzen" and "in der Hand der Bügel / der Zapfpistole" leading to associations of war.⁵¹

Geographical or political borders traversed in Oleschinski's texts are barely alluded to, but at the same time present. In the poem "Angefrorener Tang" [Frozen seaweed], the physical border is the one between Poland and Germany in Upper Silesia, a region which was contested throughout history, particularly in the 20th century. An imaginary child weaves across it:

Angefrorener Tang

auf dem Strand, und oben entlang die dämmrige Fischgrätpromenade, die starren
sturen Lampenkellen, die Stunden um Stunden vorangestapften Gummi-

stiefel, wie sie jäh aus dem Hang ragen, rostige Knöchel
im freigelegten Grenzverhau. Der rechte Fuß polnisch, das Haltbarkeitsdatum
fehlt. Der linke

ein Haken, das war mein Kind. Es rannte
im Zickzack, rann

⁵⁰ Brigitte Oleschinski, Unpublished Interview with Cheryl Dueck, 30 May, 2005, quoted from Dueck, 'Poetry of Brigitte Oleschinski', p. 387.

⁵¹ [rear window wires], PP, p.36; [tank stub]; [in the hand the bracket of the pistol nozzle], PP, p. 17.

durch den Draht, zehn Zehen sah ich
auf dem Wasser

gehen⁵²

The word “Haken” has various meanings and implications – a hook, a snag or problem, a Hakenkreuz [Swastika], thus zigzagging to escape simple explanations, like a hare trying to escape the hunter. The child runs over the border, oblivious to its regulatory meaning, and the lyric voice simply observes, rather than intervening to stop it, thus also taking the insight given in Christa Wolf’s *Kindheitsmuster* into the complexity of individual and collective memory processes a step further.⁵³ The poem has a threatening tone, but also its own dynamic, concluding with the verb of motion, “gehen” [to go], which implies the possibility of movement and a change of the order that appears rigid, or ossified at the beginning. The child’s body seems to liquify when transgressing the border “running through the wire”.⁵⁴ The liquid state of the body embraces its whole identity, implying its utter hybridity. For a reader applying conventional standards to distinguish the body of the child from the surrounding landscape, the “ten toes” which “walk / on the water” at the end of the poem, must belong to the foot of an Other. But conventional perspectives and categories are put up for questioning, here like in Oleschinski’s writing in general. This also applies to definitions of identity and alterity, concepts of the nation and of Europe. The dissolution of bodies and elements of a landscape points towards new ways of dealing with temporal, political and cultural boundaries, without making this look simple.

Travelling between places and cultures informs all of the texts analysed in the course of this paper in different ways. The subjects in the work of all three authors move away from the classical traveller between West and East, and, to varying extents, toward the nomadic, transnational “guten Europäer” of the new century, postulated by Ute Frevert.⁵⁵ However,

⁵² [Frozen seaweed // On the beach, and above along the crepuscular/dim fishbone promenade, the stiff,/ stubborn discs of lamps, for hours and hours had trudged ahead the rubber- // boots, as they suddenly stand out of the hill, rusty ankles / in the border entanglement / laid open. The right foot Polish, the best-before date / missing. The left // a hook (sideways faint, swastika), this was my child. It ran / twisting and turning, ran // through the wire, ten toes I saw / on the water // walking], PP, p. 37.

⁵³ Christa Wolf: *Kindheitsmuster*. Berlin/Weimar: Aufbau, 1976, p. 114. In *Kindheitsmuster* (Patterns of Childhood), the narrator ponders on her vain attempts to pursue her past in a zigzag movement, realising she must let her childhood Self find its own way in the course of a memory process which subtly undermines the official GDR discourse on the Nazi period and expulsion of Germans from the East following WW2. The fluidity of different timeframes suggested by Wolf’s reference to Salvador Dali’s “The Persistence [sic!] of Memory” suggests a further link between *Kindheitsmuster* and “Angefrorener Tang”,

⁵⁴ While in English a heteronym, the German “rann“, (infinitive: “rinnen”) used for the movement of a liquid differs slightly from “rannte“ (infinitive: “rennen”) which requires the use of legs.

⁵⁵ [good European], Ute Frevert: *Eurovisionen. Ansichten guter Europäer im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*. Frankfurt/M.: Fischer, 2003, p. 19.

movement affects the poetic language in Oleschinski's work more radically than in the texts of Zschorsch or Drawert. In her volume *Geisterströmung* (2004), place names have completely disappeared, and the individual poems are no longer recognisable units.⁵⁶ The impulse to communicate globally extends to a more open-ended poetic form, inspired by encounters with oral cultures and music in Indonesia and Bulgaria. Singing voices and patterns of rhythm in Bulgarian folklore, which goes back to Thracian culture, have become part of this poetry, together with the music of the American Nu-Metal and Hip Hop band Linkin Park – on CD as a musical accompaniment to the poems and as rhythms in the texts themselves. The author understands her culturally hybrid and vocal poetry as a global communication space: “a positive globalisation“, she explains in an interview in 2005, which in contrast to an exploitative economic globalisation, produces a multitude of places of friction between cultures in an attempt to achieve an understanding of the particular and human:

eine positive Globalisierung, die nicht einfach auf der Durchsetzung von ökonomischer Gewalt beruht, sondern die sehr unterschiedliche Reibungsflächen [...] produziert: Ich denke, dass in gewisser Weise die Weltsprache Poesie dafür extrem gut geeignet ist. Sie ist eine der ältesten Weltsprachen überhaupt, wenn man so will. In dem [sic] Kontext einer solchen positiven Globalisierung, einer kulturellen Globalisierung, bei Berücksichtigung aller Unterschiede, fangen wir eigentlich erst an, diese Denkform Poesie zu entdecken.⁵⁷

While in *Your Passport is not Guilty* a European space is created, in which East and West are not juxtaposed, but interlinked in highly complex manner, this space is extended further in Oleschinski's more recent work. In the course of this, her poems repeatedly refer to the classical figure of the traveller, in order to deconstruct it, while also going beyond Frevert's nomadic European of the new century. And her *Geisterströmung* ends on the lines: “die letzten Wanderer // werden Gedichte sein / in der weglosen Landschaft / zerfallener Dateien, verwegene Litaneien / auf rauhen, rohen Fege- / füßen.”⁵⁸

⁵⁶ [stream of ghosts] or [ghostly stream]

⁵⁷ [a positive globalisation which is not based on economic exploitation, but produces [...] a multitude of places of friction between cultures: I think poetry as a world language is extremely suitable for this [...] In a way, it is one of the oldest world languages. And in the context of such a positive form of globalisation, a cultural globalisation, which takes into account all differences, we are only beginning to discover poetry as a way of thinking.], quoted after Dueck, 'Poetry of Brigitte Oleschinski', p. 396.

⁵⁸ [the last wanderers // will be poems / in the pathless landscape / of disintegrated data files / daring litanies / on rough, raw purgatory feet], Brigitte Oleschinski: *Geisterströmung. Gedichte*. Cologne: DuMont, 2004, p. 112.