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# GDR Residue in Works by Julia Schoch and Antje Rávic Strubel

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von **Beret L. Norman**

*Tell all the Truth but tell it slant –*

*Success in Circuit lies<sup>1</sup>*

*-Emily Dickinson*

Even two decades after unification, current discussions of a lingering division between East and West Germans elicit doubts that Germany's ongoing economic success provides an elixir against social alienation.<sup>2</sup> This article compares several works by two younger writers, Julia Schoch and Antje Strubel (both b. 1974), who transcribe elements of daily life as it is experienced from within this ongoing social alienation and who reference a feminist critique of power. Their works evidence what I label a residue from the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). This GDR residue comprises oblique references from or about the GDR brought into a contemporary (post-1990) setting and assesses reunified Germany from an under-represented perspective—that of former East Germans. Each writer experienced a historically unique situation: a childhood in the structured socialization of the GDR; a coming-of-age during the unparalleled socio-political changes of the *Wende* and re-unification; and a young adulthood of potential, positioned within the unfamiliar, consumer-centered society of reunified Germany. Within this GDR residue each author probes the previous state of control and criticizes power structures in the reunified Federal Republic.

Both authors scrutinize contemporary Germany, and their texts trace established themes of love, loss, and power; yet a GDR residue adheres to certain descriptions of experience, place, and socialization. This residue resembles the German meaning of *Schmutzfilm* or a filmy residue that covers a surface, rather than *Schutzfilm* or a coating that protects a surface. GDR residue in Schoch and Strubel allows both authors to critique institutions of power and justice—past and present.

My analysis grew out of the authors' biographical commonalities, and the term "Wende Kids"—coined by Zaia Alexander for this generation—fits well.<sup>3</sup> Otherwise these writers trouble the kinds of categorizations that have predominated in literary critical accounts of contemporary German literature. Neither found herself categorized within Volker Hage's derogatory label "literarisches Fräuleinwunder" (literary girl wonder), coined in 1999, through which the public was drawn more to female authors' youthful faces than to the purported lack of political content in their books.<sup>4</sup> The "Generation Golf" marker overlaps with the age bracket of these authors, but describes those who were born into West German affluence—a vastly different history.<sup>5</sup> More recently Jana Hensel's and Elisabeth Raether's east-west dialogue, *Neue deutsche Mädchen* (New German Girls, 2008),<sup>6</sup> invites a possible German-German popfeminist alignment.<sup>7</sup> However, Schoch and Strubel do not fit within this group either, due to the absence of admittedly autobiographical texts in their works, and because they do not, as Baer discusses, "draw on themes of pop as it developed in postunification culture, including pastiche, remixing and resignification."<sup>8</sup>

Rather than aligning these authors with such categories, I examine through close readings how the influence of their socialization appears as residue in their works; each author uses the residue in different ways to deconstruct how dominant power has controlled what philosopher Marilyn Frye terms access and definition: "The powerful normally determine what is said and sayable."<sup>9</sup> I argue that Schoch and Strubel "assume power by controlling access and simultaneously by undertaking definition" (Frye 103); their works rewrite dominant narratives about the GDR by "telling it slant," à la the Emily Dickinson epigraph.

My analysis focuses on two novels by Schoch, *Selbstporträt mit Bonaparte* (2012) and *Mit der Geschwindigkeit des Sommers* (2009), and three novels by Strubel, *Tupolew 134* (2004), *Unter Schnee* (2001) and *Sturz der Tage in die*

*Nacht* (2011). The residue I examine in these texts obscures characters and story lines by incorporating traces from a socialization that is unlike the “big issues” of Stasi perpetrators or victims, the GDR dictatorship, or life behind the Berlin Wall; rather the GDR past appears obliquely in narratives that explore the reality of mistrust about definitions of power and justice. Due to their subtlety, the reader must decipher the meaning of the depictions and their potential consequences for creating new definitions/possibilities. I interpret each of these types of residue to be a reaction to the current socio-political context of reunified Germany, and each sheds light upon the roughly 20% of today’s population in Germany that experienced the GDR.<sup>10</sup>

What this article shows to be a slant telling of truth through GDR residue gives shape to a feminist project about access to and the definition of power: a method to apprise readers of a distinct yet overlooked reality within reunified Germany. Such slant-ness evokes the German adjective *quer* (aslant), the verb *queren* (to traverse), and also *querdenken* (unconventional thinking). With current debates in Germany about the necessity of feminism,<sup>11</sup> these writers *denken quer*, they think unconventionally, and through metaphors and tropes their works provide a slant retelling of life in contemporary Germany and confront themes of women’s literature such as identity, voice and social positioning. As Hester Baer has documented about women’s writing in Germany, these authors participate in “the attempt to write through the lens of women’s experience; the search for a language to convey female subjectivity.”<sup>12</sup> I suggest the GDR residue in Schoch and Strubel revolves around and dissects the truth of “how dominant narratives shape our lives”<sup>13</sup>; the works provide pieces of GDR history: some pieces are subtle, some circuitous, some disconcertingly still existing.

## **1. GDR Residue as Critique of Power: Official Definitions versus Lived Experience**

### **Importance of History**

In Julia Schoch’s third novel, *Selbstporträt mit Bonaparte* (Self-Portrait with Bonaparte, 2012), a first-person unnamed female narrator chronicles her four-year relationship with the man she calls Bonaparte. Schoch touches upon a difference in lived reality with three nuanced images to create residue that metaphorically refers to the GDR. The narrator first animalizes time and history: continuing with a dose of the fantastic, she describes waking up in another reality—in reunified Germany—and expresses relief: “Wir hatten die Geschichte nicht mehr im Nacken gehabt wie ein jagendes Tier. Jedenfalls war das Gefühl verschwunden, sie würde uns hetzen” (We didn’t have history on our backs anymore like an animal on the hunt. In any case the feeling disappeared, that it [history] would hunt us).<sup>14</sup> This image of an animal on the hunt represents the GDR’s *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands* (Socialist Unity Party) or SED and its mission to establish real existing socialism—by single-mindedly hunting its citizens through means of containment and surveillance. The SED’s political predation of “permanenter Beobachtung” (ongoing observation), with each citizen falling under “ideologisch[e] Generalverdacht” (ideological general suspicion), as described by journalist Andrea Backhaus, demanded more attention than the historical focus of socialist future, however much the latter appeared in the media. Backhaus contends: “Alles erfolgte im Sinne der Partei” (everything was carried out as defined by the party),<sup>15</sup> suggesting that the state’s power aligned more with controlling access and definition of the inhabitants than with democratic means.

The subsequent image for history in this novel finds a metaphor in the academic realm, closer to the narrator’s and Bonaparte’s professional lives. Bonaparte returns from the liquidation of an archive that belonged to the former GDR, and this usually reticent man cannot refrain from describing the piles of obsolete political books, “Ein halbes Jahrhundert Gedankenarbeit, die nichts mehr taugte” (a half century of thinking that no longer passed muster).<sup>16</sup> The narrator follows Bonaparte’s thought process to understand further not just his distress at the loss of books and questions about valid ideologies, but rather his envy of these writers’ certainty—of their belief in an undeniable future of promise in which they too would have access to power: “Nur wer glaubt, sich unendlich in die Zukunft hinein verlängern zu können, ist fähig zur Unbedingtheit” (Only those who believe they can extend themselves infinitely into the future are capable of the Absolute).<sup>17</sup> This disqualification of ideas spurs both a mistrust

of who defines and who decides which books receive validation as meaningful and a mistrust of how mere removal of texts can also remove their ideas. Born late into the GDR, Bonaparte and the narrator both share a sense of loss over such conviction. Even though the narrator and Bonaparte did not necessarily believe in this future themselves, the GDR residue appears in the recognition of years of obsolete work and a complete loss of belief in a championed conviction.

Thirdly, Schoch's narrator in *Selbstporträt* lands on a metaphor within nature that rationalizes Bonaparte's unannounced and ephemeral visits in her life and also introduces a feminist revision of history. Through the narrator's retelling, we hear how Bonaparte rejects the visualization of history as a staircase or a ladder, and suggests instead that it should be seen as lily pads: "Blätter von Seerosen, die im ewigen Ozean der Zeit treiben und zwischen denen keinerlei Verbindung bestand" (lily pads that float in the eternal ocean of time and between which there existed no connection).<sup>18</sup> History without linearity or causality is a provocative notion, especially when an academic in a field that finds meaning in sequential narratives proclaims it. Thus this revisionist view of history attempts both to redefine and to find meaning in each step, however unrelated. For instance, the SED's ideology could be seen as one stopover—one lily pad—instead of a sequentially vertical rung on a ladder of history.

The GDR residue of Schoch's metaphors for history first depicts a lively, if deadly, animal full of certainty for an assured future and rests on the view of history as unconnected and without a sequence, like the game of roulette that spins the novel: this diffusion produces a new way to view the short history of the GDR and one at odds with the GDR's own take on its history and role within the development of communism. Here the slant angle appears in the lack of connection: this becomes a feminist view of history in that it demands a rethinking of how history has "been done." Instead of causally linked experiences, one can have access to power through definition. Schoch redefines the GDR as one piece in a larger history.

### **Lack of Specificity**

In Schoch's *Selbstporträt* both the unnamed narrator and her lover with the nickname, derived from the bust of the French general in his apartment, are historians who live in "P." This lack of specific names creates fluidities of identity, the impossibility of immediate identification, as well as a mix of reality with fairy tale uncertainties, such as the narrator's repeated theme of uncertain time: "Es muss im Sommer gewesen sein, vor zwei oder zweihundert Jahren" (It must have been in summer, two or two hundred years ago).<sup>19</sup>

The majority of the couple's time is spent visiting casinos, which adds to the blurred lines of reality and fantasy and further removes the couple from their trained profession of documentation. One also finds in this lack of specificity in identities, place, and time, an attempt to avoid the realm of Frye's discussion of power through definition—exactly the demarcated realm that a historian, like the narrator, would record. Yet the narrator refuses such order: she provides no development of character and no clear plot, rather she randomly combines fragments of the narrator's memories with Bonaparte with snippets of autobiographical information. Thus without access to basic demarcations of story, the reader is left outside. This lack of demarcation and randomness of information reflect a sense of dislocation among former GDR citizens; I suggest Schoch's narrator writes her "inventory"<sup>20</sup> of love and roulette against all official definitions—those of one's personal identity influenced by friends and family, of intentional pursuit of career, of socially sanctioned relationships. She says the unsayable: people commit suicide / people experience life and even love as a roulette game.

### **Non-linear Progression**

Schoch suggests that focusing only on chronological and causal links removes people from innovation, a message that is echoed in the fact that the narrator quits her job as a historian and now writes texts for art exhibits and catalogs. In other words, she makes sense out of seemingly unrelated "lily pads" (to continue Bonaparte's metaphor) of art. This unnamed narrator belongs to the younger generation of former East Germans—whose futures held countless opportunities after the *Wende* and who were no longer limited to an ideologically determined ladder to find their next foothold; rather the younger East Germans jumped into experiences, places, and programs, and they defined their own post-GDR identities.

In a videotaped discussion at the *Literarisches Colloquium* in Berlin, Schoch provocatively maintains that the narrator and Bonaparte see themselves as completely detached from the past: "Es gibt keine Verbindung zwischen der Vergangenheit und dem Jetzt [for the narrator and Bonaparte]" (There is no connection between the past and the now [for the narrator and Bonaparte]).<sup>21</sup> In the context of the early 1990s this idea of an unmooring of present from past meant freedom and liberty—the potential to redefine the dominant narrative of the former GDR existed for the youngest East Germans. Twenty or more years later in this novel, one finds a bittersweet lamentation: "dies[e] Ruhe, diese[r] süße Frieden der Ausweglosigkeit, der der Frieden unserer Kindertage, ja eines ganzen Landes war" (this quiet, this sweet peace of hopelessness, that was the peace of our childhood days, yes, the peace of an entire country) (87). This harmony without the containment was found and is lost. In this same discussion, Schoch counters the moderator's assertion that the narrator's short-lived relationship with Bonaparte "funktioniert nicht" (did not work out). Schoch contends: "Naja, was heißt nicht funktioniert? Sie funktioniert eine Zeitlang." (Well, what does that mean, didn't work? It worked for awhile.)<sup>22</sup> Without naming the GDR directly, Schoch reappraises not just the relationship in the novel, but also the GDR's forty-year project, which some historians view as a failed project.<sup>23</sup> Schoch argues for the value found in undertakings despite the length of time or so-called success of the endeavor.

## **2. GDR Residue as Critique of Power: Cold War Power Plays**

### **Apolitical Hijacking**

In Antje Rávic Strubel's fourth novel, *Tupolew 134*, a fictional revision of an actual August 30, 1978 plane hijacking and subsequent trial in West Berlin, the author redefines this international, political thriller into a localized story focusing on two young East Germans, Katja and Lutz. Strubel employs a narrative framework of moving within a shaft between levels of time (*oben*, *unten*, *ganz unten*) to help her deconstruct a West-only view of an ideologically faceted event. She provides in the narrative levels of "below" (*unten*) and "way below" (*ganz unten*) the fictionalized lives of these eventual hijackers, and speculates that this male hijacker, Lutz, wanted—not to rise above the political malaise of the GDR or the lack of freedoms—but to mitigate or alleviate the boredom of his friend, Katja. Lutz' evidence that Katja was dissatisfied was admittedly slim. Lutz hears her say, "I am not happy living like this" ("Ich lebe nicht mehr gern so") (36, 37), as well as a sentence she repeats three times for the journalist—twice in past tense, once in present: "And life went on as always" ("Und das Leben ging weiter wie immer") (39, 44); "And life goes on as always" ("Und das Leben geht weiter wie immer") (45). Ennui enwrapped Katja. The older Katja clarifies the above sentence to the young West German journalist, "Dieser Satz war Politik" (45). Daily reality in the GDR included boredom and tedium, and herein lies a GDR residue—a residue that refuses political ideologies and demands personal fulfillment.

The West's winning rhetoric of the Cold War focused on the idea that many citizens left the oppressive East for the free West. Yet Strubel provides a localized and contradictory story: a bored young woman wants the excitement of change—and launches this through an affair with a West German (Hans Meerkopf) who, in the middle of their escape plan, gets arrested in Poland with false passports for all three of them. Consequently, Katja and Lutz fly from Poland back to Germany, and Lutz hijacks the plane—thus in Strubel's hands, there is no plan to the hijacking, it was a reaction to the situation. The underlying story may seem oddly stereotypical—e.g., a woman seeking thrills and change through a sexual affair—but with Strubel this story becomes defiant: she writes against a Western, prescribed idea of every East German citizen living either as a Party Member or as a political dissident; she allows for the less politically charged reasons for wanting change—for instance, Katja recalls about her younger self that "she wanted to belong to the world in which it was possible to see 44 sunsets, *Forty-four sunsets, said the little prince* [...]"<sup>24</sup> (215, emphasis in the original). This reference to Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's 1943 novella, *The Little Prince*, displays Katja's simplistic wish for an adult's freedom to travel. Katja's rhetorical question to the younger journalist from West Germany serves as GDR residue, "Stört euer sauberes Bild, was?" (304).

### **Shadow of an Eastern European Revolution**

In Strubel's second novel, *Unter Schnee* (translated as *Snowed Under*, hereafter SU) the two German protagonists, the couple Evy and Vera, travel for a winter holiday to a Czech ski town. They reside in Mrs. Beran's pension and in this small side-story, one finds a political shadow and the trace of GDR residue. All visitors from the West misname the pension's owner *Frau Beranu*; this stems from the fact that her pension is called *U Beranu*—the "u" at the end appears because it is the dative case in Czech (Strubel, SU 14).<sup>25</sup> Even Mrs. Beran entertains a sense of ambiguity of her identity: "She sometimes wonders whether her name really isn't Beranu. If everybody says it is" (SU 14). Frau Beran's husband died in the late 1960s when the Czech emergency response crew was on high alert for another situation—the anti-government protests in Prague in 1968—and thus could not come to help her husband when he had a stroke. This episode focuses on the eponymous rescue of Vera and is told by an omniscient narrator with details one of the younger rescuers, Oleg's, thoughts as he describes the "anecdote" (SU 64, 67)—the situation in which Mr. Beran died, which "belong[s] to everyone now" (67):

*The question isn't whether Herr Beran could have been saved back then. That's the official version everyone agreed on. The real question is whether Jiří, or he, or anybody else on border patrol at the time, would have disobeyed an order. Whether they would have simply refused to fly their helicopters into Prague. [...] whether the sudden stroke really would have been reason enough for disobeying the order or merely a good excuse to reject that kind of military operation (67).*

With three different first person narrators in this episodic novel (Evy, Vera and a woman only called "Oliver's wife"), it is telling that this story comes second-hand through the thoughts of one of the rescuers. Instead of a personal story, Oleg's thoughts form a transnational residue that questions the role of duty. Here the residue surfaces as an oblique, rhetorical question to all who serve a country's politics: Who dares to disobey an order?

### **3. GDR Residue as Critique of Power: The GDR's Power over Individuals' Lives Geological Metaphors**

To evoke the mistrust of the state in daily lives, Strubel employs productive metaphors from earth science—the first from the sea. In her seventh novel, *Sturz der Tage in die Nacht* (When the Days Plunge into Night, 2011), a twenty-four-year-old student, Erik, travels to a Swedish island where he has a summer love affair with a German ornithologist, Inez. An omniscient narrator opens the novel with a description of the Baltic Sea: "Die Ostsee täuscht das Meer gewissermaßen vor [...] als ob sie ein Ozean wäre" (The Baltic Sea misleads one to think it could be an ocean).<sup>26</sup> Seawater elements, like seagulls, mussels, and salt water, deceive one into believing the Baltic Sea is more than a brackish body of water: the sea tempts one to believe it is something that it isn't. This parallels the deception in Inez's life: her life in the GDR and in Europe in 2008—the novel's narrative time, can be envisioned as waves of uncertain water.

The GDR residue within this Baltic Sea metaphor incorporates GDR freedoms: one has signifiers of freedom (some travel, voting rights) yet one is not fully free.

In *Tupolew 134*, Strubel includes another geological metaphor, sand. Here sand is a metaphor for the real existing socialism and the rule-abiding mindset in the GDR. As described by cultural journalist and psychologist, Annette Simon, this mindset was one without "öffentliche Selbstverständigung über wesentliche Konflikte" (public self-understanding about essential conflicts).<sup>27</sup> (74). Sand is not permanent in this GDR construction, rather it is blown about by trucks and forms mosaics on bus stops in this novel, but it is widespread and pervasive and a part of every region, as the first person retrospective narrator, Katja, states: "unsere persönliche Wüste" (our own desert).<sup>28</sup> Katja, recalls why her father became a teacher "für eine Weile aus diesem Sand herauszukommen, wenigstens mit dem Kopf" (to get out of this sand for a while, at least in his thoughts).<sup>29</sup> And Lutz Schaper, Katja's friend and co-hijacker, describes the figurative sand that runs through him and makes him dull and indifferent wherever he goes: "daß der Sand immer da sein wird" (that the sand will always be there).<sup>30</sup> The sand for Katja's father and for Lutz, as GDR



residue, is the GDR socialization and system of limits. This metaphor of geology (here, sand) as GDR residue proves significant: the timeworn soil of GDR experience is dispersed but not gone, and it will never vanish entirely. It remains underfoot and not necessarily noticed but for the need of sweeping it away. Strubel uses nature—metaphors of the sea and sediment—to erode the man-made creation and disappearance of the GDR; she shows how, like water, like sand, the GDR remains and withstands what cultural journalist Annette Simon calls the “massiv[e] Entwertung” (massive devaluation)<sup>31</sup> of the GDR.

Waters of deception also appear as GDR residue that critiques state power in Julia Schoch’s second novel, *Mit der Geschwindigkeit des Sommers* (With the Speed of Summer, 2009). The narrator echoes Inez’ (from Strubel’s *Sturz*) mistrustful voice above as she describes her hometown, a garrison: “Dieses Gewässer [das Stettiner Haff], das uns von der Ostsee trennt, ist ein falsches Meer” (This body of water [the Stettin lagoon], that separates us from the Baltic Sea, is a counterfeit sea) and “unbeweglich, grau. Ein Gefühl von Betrug” (unmoving, gray. A feeling of betrayal).<sup>32</sup> The conspiracy here blames those in the GDR for locating this military town next to a lagoon, with stale waters of containment that keep one from enjoying, playing in, or even seeing the Baltic Sea; thus the state exerts a further containment over individuals’ lives through this strategic (and locked in) location of the town for the military base. Both references to the GDR through the false sea image suggest that nature in its delicate complexity may deceive, but humans in power determine ordinary citizens’ access to and thus knowledge of nature.

### **Continued Misuse of GDR Power**

Strubel’s use of deception continues in *Sturz* and remains linked to the GDR, as late in the novel she develops the figure of Felix Ton, a CDU candidate for the Bundestag from Brandenburg. Ton deceives the public with his campaign’s publicity focus on him as a “wiedervereinigter Vater” (reunified father):<sup>33</sup> he claims the mother of his son left him to go to West Germany in 1984, whereas readers know that Ton left the mother, Inez. As a player in the dominant power structure, Ton can create meaning and definition. Inez’ mistrust, based on her intimate knowledge, will later be public, but she has no access to power and thus her successful attack on Ton must remain private. This category of GDR residue as misused power becomes menacing in Strubel’s *Sturz*, as the German ornithologist, Inez, correctly assumes the dead bird that washed up near her cabin on the Swedish island was intentionally poisoned to make a point to her. Such a paranoid reaction seems highly implausible to the Swedish council whom she informs of the poisoning, but she is correct. The bird was killed by the former Stasi agent and current “risk manager,” Rainer Feldberg, to illustrate the power Feldberg has even in the narrative time of 2008, long after his time in the Stasi. Feldberg reminds Inez of her fear of loss, what he privately records as a “produktives Verhältnis zu Angst” (productive relationship to fear) in his papers that Erik later reads.<sup>34</sup> Because she realizes that Feldberg’s power—his access to her—has returned, Inez falls ill and in her fever she revisits the years 1983 and 1984 when Feldberg assisted her through his position within the Stasi. For his part, Feldberg’s self-portrayal includes a sense of protection toward Inez and his position of power allows him to define his role; Feldberg tells Erik he “wurde so etwas wie ihr Schutzengel” (became something like her guardian angel).<sup>35</sup>

*Sturz*’s GDR residue of how one’s power was obtained through a GDR past appears as a more focused opportunism that distinctly calls forth mistrust, in Feldberg’s younger colleague in the Stasi, Felix Ton. Here the GDR residue as a coating is not washed away. During her fever following the dead bird’s appearance, Inez remembers the ideological underpinnings of this coating; she remembers Ton’s enthusiastic exclamation, which as a teenager she thought meant they had a future together: “Wir sind für was Großes gemacht” (We are made for something big).<sup>36</sup> In truth Ton states this as an exclusionary view of his ability and desire to rise in the ranks of power. What in 1983 he states flirtatiously, he empties of any collective meaning in 1989 and proves himself to be entirely self-preserving: on November 9, 1989, he returns to his office and shreds incriminating documents about his work in the Stasi, “[so] dass am Ende bestimmte Karteieinträge und Vorgänge unter seinem Namen nicht mehr existierten” (so that in the end certain card entries and events associated with his name no longer existed).<sup>37</sup> His position within the institution, here the Stasi, affords him both access to these files and control over definition; when the Stasi is criminalized, he will

no longer be connected to it. It is Inez' privately gained access to this knowledge that creates the *Schmutzfilm* or residue which prevents his public access to more power: her information keeps him from launching into his Bundestag candidacy in 2008.

### **Determining definition**

The GDR residue that critiques the GDR's power over individuals' lives endures in the form of "Leere," a physical and emotional emptiness. In Schoch's *Mit der Geschwindigkeit des Sommers*, the narrator describes "die Leere" (emptiness) in the post-Wende landscape and the "Kargheit, die außen um uns war, [das] Grau der Abläufe, die uns gefangen hielt" (the sparseness that was around us, [the] grayness of the events, that held us captive) in the Baltic Sea town in the GDR where the narrator grew up and where her sister still lived until years later.<sup>38</sup> The narrator's bleak town near the Polish border with its military base and one train track embodies this emptiness, and through it the narrator introduces a class critique of power—specifically of access: a soldier's family, like theirs, stationed in this "Sackgasse" (cul de sac) lacks the educated levels of discussion found in more diverse communities; there were no rituals, no regional festivals, no religious litanies, "weder den Singsang kirchlicher Litaneien [...] noch bürgerliches Salongeschwätz untermalt von Klavieren" (neither the singsong of church litanies [...] nor the bourgeois salon chitchat accompanied by piano) here "in dieser quadratischen, aus einheitlichen Platten hergestellten Welt" (in this quadratic world constructed of standardized slabs).<sup>39</sup> One reviewer connects the physical buildings to the emptiness: "Schoch schildert die Künstlichkeit, Trostlosigkeit und Leblosigkeit dieser Plattenbau gewordenen Planungssillusion als Geisterstadt und Verbannungsort" (Schoch illustrates the artificiality, comfortlessness, and lifelessness of this planning-illusion-turned-*Plattenbau* as a ghost town and place of exile.)<sup>40</sup> The GDR institutions of power created this garrison or place of exile and cut off access of its inhabitants to knowledge other than what those in power desired them to have.

This emptiness of a planned, quadratic world remains even in reunified Germany. Erik, the student in Strubel's *Sturz*, reflects upon the planned community in his hometown of Neubrandenburg in the decade following the *Wende*. With a geographical distance from Germany during his time on the Swedish island Stora Karlsö, Erik recalls a "Leere" that reminds him of the post-*Wende* scenario: "die Leere der Sonntagnachmittage [in Sweden reminds him of] dieselbe Ödnis umringt von Plattenbauten" (the emptiness of the Sunday afternoons [in Sweden reminds him of] the same wasteland surrounded by prefabricated concrete buildings).<sup>41</sup> Erik also describes these *Plattenbau* apartments as "Wohnklos," or shoebox apartments, such as the two rooms with a bathroom that he and his mother shared. The institutional powers in the GDR that created the "Jedem eine Wohnung" (to each an apartment) program again structurally controlled definition through planning. Yet the residue of emptiness clings to the physical bleakness and emotional desolation despite the planned communal sense behind the architectural intentions.

Another residue takes shape in a feeling of responsibility for and loyalty to an idea that results from ideological socialization—this adheres to the narrator's remembrances in Schoch's novel, *Mit der Geschwindigkeit des Sommers*. The narrator attempts to understand her sister's sudden suicide, and she recalls the prevalence of duty in her sibling's life: "Diese Pflichttreue. [...] , das Verantwortungsgefühl" (this loyalty to duty, the feeling of responsibility).<sup>42</sup> Schoch's narrator remains frustrated that even after unification her sister regarded her own life as if it were about "das Erledigen einer Hausaufgabe. Wegarbeiten und Lob. Auswendiglernen und Hersagen" (the completion of an assignment. Hard work and praise. Memorize and recite).<sup>43</sup> This residue of obligatory duty within one's socialization depicts the sister as the state's pupil—powerless, who never decides the curricular turn or direction of development. As she had never tried to access a level of power or create a definition of her own, the sister was caught in the definitions placed upon her through her most recent choices from 1989: wife and mother. The sister believed these definitions precluded her from the freedom to travel, which her younger sister (the narrator) enjoyed. The narrator's shock at her sister's sudden trip to New York City and her suicide there, evokes thoughts of the sister's alienation within the new order of reunified Germany. The narrator tries to resist this singular response to GDR residue as one of self-destruction.



These younger writers reveal this residue of devaluation. More than twenty five years after reunification, many “know” the GDR through limited, consumable ideas, like *Ampelmännchen* (little green man on traffic lights) and the *Trabi* (the most common vehicle in the GDR); and although as Annett Simon suggests, *das Ampelmännchen* “geht um das Sichtbarwerden des inzwischen versunkenen Landes” (it’s about the ‘becoming visible’ of a country that in the meantime has sunk),<sup>44</sup> such physical items limit a full picture of how GDR citizens lived. Schoch and Strubel provide indirect approaches, with a GDR residue adhered within their pages to call for renewed reflection.

#### 4. Conclusion

To pose the famous question from Christa Wolf’s 1990 novel, *Was bleibt* (What Remains),<sup>45</sup> I suggest this GDR residue will remain—it adheres to these well-crafted, unsentimental stories that obliquely illuminate fragments of lingering GDR experience. Each author attaches her unique biography to her writing. Schoch declares writing both a process that intertwines the author’s life and has the goal of veracity: “Im Schreiben gelangt man nicht nur zur Wahrheit, sondern zu einer Wahrhaftigkeit” (In writing, one arrives not just at truth, but at a truthfulness).<sup>46</sup> In all her works Strubel provocatively pushes toward her appeal for a “Verunsicherung der Grenzen” (uncertainty of borders)<sup>47</sup> and “die Grenzen in der Gesellschaft auseinandersetzen” (to fight against the limits of society).<sup>48</sup> Strubel’s deliberate prod toward uncertainty, similar to Schoch’s fragmentary narrations, necessitate that readers question the texts and work with them to find their own answers.

Yet it is not just about showing what remains, rather each of these authors uses this residue as an impulse away from it, into new ways of thinking, beyond dualistic East/West portrayals. Schoch’s physical and social isolation in *Mit der Geschwindigkeit*, and her comments on history in *Selbstporträt*, illustrate a refuge with no destination; Schoch and Strubel use GDR residue to simultaneously show the past’s interference in the present and the need for new underpinnings of identity and interaction. Further, in her many other works, Strubel expects readers to move away from the normative gender binary and from heterosexist views of the world<sup>49</sup> and into innovation and philosophical musings of, among other things, one’s ability to create a doppelgänger or a new identity<sup>50</sup> or to challenge what is socially acceptable.<sup>51</sup>

Overall this article highlights the subtleties and strengths of two writers who have long careers ahead of them and who contribute early on to a twenty-first-century German literature that “provide[s] more breadth and perhaps less dogma than its predecessors.”<sup>52</sup> The types of GDR residue in these authors’ works relate to Emily Dickinson’s poem “Tell all the Truth but tell it Slant.” Through their works the authors slantly provide remnants of how the GDR’s forty years still undervalue, restrict and define some peoples’ experiences in reunified Germany.

#### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Emily Dickinson’s poem #1263 in Helen Vendler, *Dickinson. Selected Poems and Commentaries* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 431.

<sup>2</sup> For discussions about the ongoing division between East and West Germany see Alexander Osang, “The Little Germans: Alienation Still Divides East from West,” *Spiegel Online International*, August 21, 2013, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/commentary-on-lingering-alienation-between-east-and-west-germans-a-917483.html>; Jeevan Vasagar, “Germany ‘faces east-west divide for decades,’” *The Telegraph*, July 23, 2013, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/germany/10198308/Germany-faces-east-west-divide-for-decades.html>; and Frédéric Lemaître, “East-West German split still lingers on 22 years after reunification,” *The Guardian*, October 9, 2012, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/oct/09/west-east-germany-split>. For a map of Berlin divided along voting lines in East and West in the most recent Bundestag election, see also Stephan Evans, “Does the Berlin Wall Still Exist?,” *BBC News Berlin*, September 26, 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-24238553>.

- <sup>3</sup> Zaia Alexander, "The Origin of Rávic," p. x.
- <sup>4</sup> For a useful deconstruction of this term, see Hester Baer, "Frauenliteratur," pp. 70-72.
- <sup>5</sup> This term arises from Florian Illies' book of the same title, *Generation Golf. Eine Inspektion*, Fischer Taschenbuch, 2001.
- <sup>6</sup> Jana Hensel and Elizabeth Raether, *Neue deutsche Mädchen* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 2008).
- <sup>7</sup> See Baer, "German Feminism in the Age of Neoliberalism: Jana Hensel and Elisabeth Reather's *Neue deutsche Mädchen*," *German Studies Review* 35, no. 2 (2012): 355-374.
- <sup>8</sup> Baer, "German Feminism," p. 365.
- <sup>9</sup> Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*, The Crossing Press, 1983, p. 105.
- <sup>10</sup> This 20% is formed using the population of Berlin and the five New Federal States, which make up the former East Germany. It is only 16% if Berlin is not included in this population percentage. See *Bevölkerungsentwicklung Deutschlands ab 1950- Einwohnerzahlen West- und Ostdeutschlands, Proportionen der Weltbevölkerung*, <http://pdwb.de/nd06.htm>.
- <sup>11</sup> See Baer, "Frauenliteratur," and Hester Baer "Introduction: Resignifications of Feminism in Contemporary Germany," in "Contemporary Women's Writing and the Return of Feminism in Germany," edited by Hester Baer, special issue, *Studies in Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Literature* vol., 35, no. 1, Winter 2011, pp. 1-17.
- <sup>12</sup> Baer, "Frauenliteratur," p. 74.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 78.
- <sup>14</sup> Schoch, *Selbstporträt*, pp. 77-78.
- <sup>15</sup> Andrea Backhaus, "DDR hieß auch Entfremdung vom eigenen Ich," *Die Welt*, 7 Aug 2011.
- <sup>16</sup> Schoch, *Selbstporträt*, p. 81.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 81.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 114.
- <sup>19</sup> Julia Schoch, *Selbstporträt mit Bonaparte*, Piper, 2012, p. 86. All translations from the German are mine unless otherwise noted.
- <sup>20</sup> "An inventory of times spent together," in "Take a Chance on Me." *New Books in German*. Rev. Julia Schoch. *Selbstporträt*. [http://www.new-books-in-german.com/129002/Uploaded/NBG\\_12aut\\_p29\\_Schoch.pdf](http://www.new-books-in-german.com/129002/Uploaded/NBG_12aut_p29_Schoch.pdf).
- <sup>21</sup> Schoch, "Lesung und Gespräch."
- <sup>22</sup> Schoch, "Lesung und Gespräch."
- <sup>23</sup> Catherine Epstein (2003) mentions the following works that "tend to imply that East Germany had a 'failed' history, while West Germany had a 'good' history": Elizabeth D. Heineman, *What Difference Does a Husband Make? Women and Marital Status in Nazi and Postwar Germany* (Berkeley, 1999); Jeffrey Herf, *Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997); and Uta G. Poiger, *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels: Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided Germany* (Berkeley, 2000). (in Epstein, p. 657, footnote 51).
- <sup>24</sup> "Sie wollte zu der Welt gehören, in der es möglich war, vierundvierzig Sonnenuntergänge an einem Tag zu erleben. *Forty-four sunsets, said the little prince* [...]" (Rávic Strubel, *Tupolew 134*, 215 emphasis in the original).
- <sup>25</sup> Antje Rávic Strubel, *Snowed Under. An Episodic Novel*, translated by Zaia Alexander, Red Hen Press, 2008.
- <sup>26</sup> Antje Rávic Strubel, *Sturz der Tage in die Nacht*, S. Fischer Verlag, 2011, p. 10. An omniscient narrator is present in eight of the novel's thirteen sections.
- <sup>27</sup> Annette, Simon, "Fremd im eigenen Land?," p. 74.
- <sup>28</sup> Strubel, *Tupolew 134*, p. 97.

- <sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 100.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 248.
- <sup>31</sup> Annette Simon, "Die 'innere Einheit'—Wunschbild oder Zerrbild?" p. 141.
- <sup>32</sup> Julia Schoch, *Mit der Geschwindigkeit des Sommers*, Piper, 2009, p. 78.
- <sup>33</sup> Strubel, *Sturz*, p. 385.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 317.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 91.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 176.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 198.
- <sup>38</sup> Schoch, *Mit der Geschwindigkeit des Sommers*, pp. 73; 86; 45.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid., pp. 119; 19.
- <sup>40</sup> Ijoma Mangold, "Das Echo des Schellenrings," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, March 10, 2009.
- <sup>41</sup> Strubel, *Sturz*, p. 147.
- <sup>42</sup> Schoch, *Mit der Geschwindigkeit*, p. 107.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 107.
- <sup>44</sup> Simon, "Fremd im eigenen Land?," p. 81.
- <sup>45</sup> Christa Wolf, *Was bleibt. Erzählung*, Luchterhand, 1990.
- <sup>46</sup> Schoch, "Den Osten gibt's nicht mehr. Jetzt ist alles Wilder Westen."
- <sup>47</sup> Strubel, "Wenn ich auf eine Lösung stoße," p. 79.
- <sup>48</sup> Strubel, "Wenn ich auf eine Lösung stoße," p. 80.
- <sup>49</sup> For more on Strubel's expansion away from heteronormative gender roles see: Claudia Breger; Emily Jeremiah, pp. 98-131; Faye Stewart (2013, 2014); Helen Finch; and Norman.
- <sup>50</sup> Strubel consistently creates double identities such as Adina with her online name "Last Mohican" in *Unter Schnee*, Christiana/Jo in *Offene Blende*, Anja/Schmoll in *Kältere Schichten der Luft*. In *Vom Dorf* "Antje Rávic Strubel" is a figure about whom a stalker—the first person narrator—writes and whose style he imitates.
- <sup>51</sup> For instance, the incestuous relationship of Inez and Erik in *Sturz*, and Adina's polyfidelity in my reading of Strubel's *Unter Schnee* (see Norman, "Ambiguities," 71-74).
- <sup>52</sup> Katharina Gerstenberger, *Writing the New Berlin*, Camden House, 2008, p. 11.

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