



# The German Legacy in East Central Europe

As Recorded in Recent  
German-Language Literature

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Valentina Glajar

*The German Legacy in East Central Europe*

This study focuses on the complex legacy of the German and Austrian political and cultural presence in East Central Europe in the twentieth century. It contributes to the discussion of “German” identity in eastern Europe, and has important implications for German, Austrian, and East European studies. It addresses the specific situations of the former Habsburg regions of Bukovina (the Ukraine/Romania), Moravia (the Czech Republic), and Banat (Romania) as illustrated in contemporary literature by German-speaking authors, such as Herta Müller, Erica Pedretti, Gregor von Rezzori, and Edgar Hilsenrath. The works of these authors constitute contrastive historiographic narratives of the multiethnic regions of East-Central Europe under a series of oppressive regimes: first Austrian imperialism, and then German and Romanian fascism in Bukovina; National Socialism in Moravia, and Communism in Romania. Valentina Glajar investigates these narratives as representations of multicultural East Central Europe in German-language literature that show the political and ethnic tensions between Germans and local peoples that marked these regions throughout the twentieth century, often with tragic consequences. The study thus expands and diversifies the understanding of German literature and challenges the concept of a homogeneous German identity reaching far beyond the borders of the German-speaking countries.

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The German Legacy  
in East Central Europe  
as Recorded in Recent  
German-Language Literature

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CAMDEN HOUSE

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*For my mother*



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V. G.  
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## Introduction

AFTER 1945, 15,000,000 ETHNIC GERMANS from East Europe entered Germany. The successive stages of immigration included, first, ethnic Germans who were expelled by Czechoslovakia and Poland because of their collaboration with Nazi Germany. Later, when the Communists came to power, many Germans left to escape the oppressive regimes and to overcome economic hardship.<sup>1</sup> After 1989, when democracies were established in the East European countries, the flood of emigration did not stop. On the contrary, in 1990 alone almost 400,000 ethnic Germans entered Germany. Considered an ethnic minority in their homelands, these ethnic Germans arrived in the Federal Republic only to realize that they had acquired another minority status — that of semi-foreigners in the country of their ancestors. In their former countries of residence they were called Germans; in Germany they are called *Ausiedler* (emigrants), *Volksdeutsche* (ethnic Germans), or *fremde Deutsche* (alien Germans), terms that more or less function as alternatives to the term *Ausländer* (foreigners). The term *Volksdeutsche* not only reflects the inherent issue of conflicting definitions of “Germanness” but also brings up memories of the Third Reich, when Hitler granted German citizenship to many ethnic Germans under the Nazi politics regarding ethnic Germans living outside the German Reich (*NS-Volkstumspolitik*).<sup>2</sup> During the Nazi era the existence of German minorities beyond the Reich was used as an excuse for military expansion, and many ethnic Germans served in Hitler’s armies.<sup>3</sup> After 1945, during the Cold War, the Federal Republic of Germany continued to recognize the Germans of Eastern Europe as compatriots. After the collapse of the Iron Curtain, however, when large numbers of *Volksdeutsche* immigrated to the Federal Republic, they were no longer greeted as long-lost siblings but were looked down on as “Eastern Europeans.”

This massive migration from East to West also included German-speaking writers who tried to establish themselves in German-speaking or other West European countries. Although these authors have often been marginalized by mainstream criticism as Easterners and foreigners to Western realities, minority criticism has rarely included or analyzed literature written by German-speaking authors from East Central Europe. Many German critics do not wholeheartedly consider this literature German, because its “Germanness” is defined within the Eastern European cultural and political context; nor is minority criticism addressing the “foreignness” of these authors appropriate, given that their ethnic heritage is German.

Furthermore, the complex situation of the German-speaking Jewish writers from Eastern Europe who had to redefine their relationship with Germans and Germany after the Second World War is best reflected in the life and work of Paul Celan (1920–1970) and Rose Ausländer (1901–1988). Celan was never able to reconcile *Heimat* and his mother tongue with postwar Germany; and he chose to live in France rather than in any German-speaking country, although he continued to write poetry in German. Ausländer had to struggle with the same dilemma of “Muttersprache, Mördersprache.”<sup>4</sup> After living in the United States for many years, however, she moved to Germany in 1965, and for the last eighteen years of her life she resided in the Nelly-Sachs-Haus in Düsseldorf. Similarly, Edgar Hilsenrath (b. 1926), whose *Wahlheimat* was Bukovina, was reluctant to return to his native Germany until he realized that he needed a German-speaking context for his writing. In 1975 he left the United States and moved permanently to Berlin.

Literary texts by non-German authors were first categorized as *Gastarbeiter-* or *Ausländerliteratur* and reflected mostly the social changes in Germany. In the 1980s and 1990s, however, new debates were initiated that challenged the ethnically defined German literature (Suhr 1989; Teraoka 1987; Adelson 1990) and that articulated a new definition for German literature and a new canon that would include German-language literature by native and nonnative authors (Jankowsky 1997; Lorenz and Posthofen 1998; Fachinger 2001).<sup>5</sup> For a long time nonnative authors had participated in literary contests for “foreigners” (such as the Adalbert von Chamisso Prize). In 1991, however, for the first time a nonnative female writer, Emine Sevgi Özdamar, won the Ingeborg Bachmann Prize. Three years later Herta Müller became the first German-speaking author from Romania to win the Kleist Literary Award. Faced with this change, German critics have been forced to acknowledge the cultural diversity of writers in German.

The resistance to the inclusion and integration of these authors of multicultural backgrounds into the canon of German literature becomes obvious in the way critics approach and analyze their texts. As Karen Jankowsky points out in “‘German’ Literature Contested,” “critics have failed, for example, to connect Özdamar’s text with modern society and literature in Turkey, as well as with the author’s own experiences in Turkey and the two Germanies” (262). In other words, critics reduce the historical, cultural, and political context in Özdamar’s novel to a timeless “Oriental” Turkey, further perpetuating the cliché of oriental fairy tales and storytelling. Likewise, the cultural and historical dimensions, as well as the political context of East European German-speaking authors such as Herta Müller are often marginalized. For example, the German critic Norbert Otto Eke argues that Müller can only be considered a German author if critics ignore her cultural heritage.<sup>6</sup> Eke’s statement clearly implies a valorization of the dominant literature at the expense of minority literature, because he views Müller’s link to the Banat-

Swabian minority as an impediment to her status. While Eke's intentions seem positive — after all, he does propose Müller's inclusion in German literature — his vision of German literature remains monocultural and hegemonic.

Yet, if critics are expected to address bicultural or multicultural influences in a way that will not just valorize culture from Germany but acknowledge the values and distinct histories of other cultures, what would be the “right” methodology with which to approach multicultural contexts and origins? According to the methodological debate initiated by Ülker Gökberk in her 1997 article “*Culture Studies* und die Türken” and to Leslie A. Adelson's response to Gökberk's argument, German Studies scholars are faced with an ongoing dilemma regarding how to analyze multicultural texts.<sup>7</sup> Although both scholars agree on including Turkish politics and history in their analyses of texts written by Turkish-German authors or about Turkey, such as Sten Nadolny's novel *Selim oder die Gabe der Rede* (1990), they disagree on how to proceed in their investigations (Adelson 281). Adelson articulates an eclectic and goal-oriented approach in her response, arguing: “In any event, I am far less interested in loyalty to a single methodology (be it culture studies, intercultural hermeneutics, or something else altogether) than I am in exploring complex cultural and historical questions that different methodologies allow us to pose and probe with varying — hopefully increasing — degree of sophistication” (278). Jankowsky also suggests “reading Özdamar for ‘intersections’ of cultural influences from Turkey and Germany” (263). Nina Berman discusses the term *germanophone*, which refers to texts written in German by authors of diverse backgrounds and “requires the critic to consider the importance of different cultural settings for the literary text.”<sup>8</sup> In spite of disagreements and open-ended methodological questions, what comes across most evidently when considering Jankowsky's, Gökberk's, Adelson's, and Berman's positions is their emphasis on the importance of investigating cultural and historical questions when dealing with multicultural contexts.

In this study I raise historical and cultural questions regarding the complex legacy of the German and Austrian presence in East Central Europe, as illustrated in works by Gregor von Rezzori (1914–1998), Edgar Hilsenrath (b. 1926), Erica Pedretti (b. 1930), and Herta Müller (b. 1953). In choosing these authors and their specific texts I considered aspects of their lives and works that unify this study, which deals with various multicultural regions (Bukovina, Moravia, and Banat), German-speaking communities (Austro-Germans, German-speaking Eastern Jews, Sudeten Germans, and Banat-Swabians), and time frames (1918; 1938–44; 1945; the 1980s). First, these authors and their writings represent and reflect the cultural diversity of East Central Europe, as well as the traumatic events of twentieth-century Europe. The authors were all witnesses to major historical events and felt compelled to write about them in their autobiographical and essayistic texts.

Rezzori experienced the dissolution of the Habsburg Empire and the transition of the former Austrian crown land Bukovina to the Romanian kingdom. Hilsenrath documents the destruction of the Bukovinian Jewry during the Holocaust in Transnistria. Pedretti describes the expulsion of the German population of Czechoslovakia as a measure of retaliation for its collaboration with the Nazi regime. Müller re-creates the bleak atmosphere under the Communist dictatorship of Nicolae Ceaușescu. I argue that ahistorical readings of these texts undercut the historical and political messages of the narratives and disregard the circumstances of their production.

As by-products of the centuries-long Habsburg presence in this region, these texts express historical questions and constitute contrastive historiographic narratives of East Central European multiethnic regions under various oppressive regimes. The stereotypical depiction of Slavic and other Eastern peoples reflects not only the former Habsburg Germans' belief in a "superior" German culture vis-à-vis the "barbaric" peoples of the East but also, to a large extent, contemporary attitudes toward Slavic and other Eastern European peoples. Analyzing the historical and autobiographical dimensions of the narratives allowed me to study representations of multicultural East Central Europe in German-language literature and to examine the portrayal of political and ethnic tensions between Germans and the local peoples that have marked these regions throughout the twentieth century, often with tragic consequences.

Although this study may provide a fragmented picture of the German-language presence in Eastern Europe, it follows the events chronologically as a collage of narratives that transcend national and cultural borders. Analyzing the impact of political events on the expression of belonging and identification of these authors allows me to study the way their life stories intersect with the history of German-speaking communities in East Central Europe, which for centuries dominated the other local peoples under Habsburg rule. The dissolution of the Habsburg Empire in 1918 gave rise to new political and ethnic tensions in the emerging nation-states, since these German communities were faced with a new status that no longer entailed cultural and political dominance. As I show in my analysis, these Germans' belief in a "superior" German culture and civilization shaped their relationship with the East Central European peoples for most of their common history. The ethnocentrism and intolerance of Sudeten Germans and Banat-Swabians, as portrayed in Pedretti's and Müller's texts, are in part consequences of the privileged positions they enjoyed during the Habsburg Empire until 1918. Rezzori's memoirs also illustrate a clear hierarchy among the nationalities as well as anti-Semitic attitudes that existed before the rise of fascism in Romania, which is best exemplified in Hilsenrath's autobiographical novel.

These four authors' representations of the multicultural regions of Bukovina, Banat, and Moravia suggest a hierarchical relationship among

privileged and less privileged or underprivileged nationalities within Austria-Hungary that outlasted the demise of the empire. While some historians argued for years that the eastern regions of the Habsburg Empire functioned as colonies for Austro-Germans and, in part, for Hungarians, postcolonial criticism has hardly acknowledged the situation of Austria-Hungary.<sup>9</sup> Russell Berman, Katherine Arens, and Marcia Klotz have raised questions regarding the situation of East European countries in the context of empires such as the Habsburg, German, Russian, and Ottoman empires, suggesting that discussions of German colonialism should include these regions.<sup>10</sup> The paradigms developed for the French and British empires might not be entirely applicable to the Habsburg Empire, but they are also defined in terms of East versus West, which were at the core of the Habsburg expansion to the East. Unlike the British and French rule in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, the Habsburgs' rule was not characterized by massacres, nor was the conflict of colonizer versus colonized always spelled out in racial differences. Just as with the British and the French colonizers, however, the Habsburgs had a *mission civilisatrice* in the “barbaric” East.<sup>11</sup> The Habsburgs' belief in a “superior” German culture and civilization was employed to justify their political, cultural, and economic mission in East Europe. Habsburg rule not only allowed for an economic exploitation of the eastern regions but also engraved the colonialist idea of a “superior” German civilization into the minds of the subject peoples.

In recent publications scholars have tried to address the distinct features of German colonialism vis-à-vis the British or the French models.<sup>12</sup> For the most part, though, they have ignored the Austro-Germans and their legacy in East Central Europe. Suzanne Zantop, for example, limits her study to colonial fantasies and the colonial imagination, which prefigured the Germans' involvement in Africa.<sup>13</sup> As Nina Berman points out, however, the Habsburg Empire was engaged in expansionist politics long before the founding of the German colonial empire;<sup>14</sup> both Banat and Bukovina, for example, were acquired and colonized in the 1770s. Berman refers to economic and political developments and coins the term “non-occupational colonialism” to describe political and economic domination not involving an occupying army or administrative bureaucracy, especially in Middle Eastern and North African countries.<sup>15</sup>

Few scholars of East European Studies have engaged in the postcolonial debate regarding the relationship between regions in East Central Europe and empires such as the Habsburg, Russian, and Ottoman. As David Chioni Moore argues in his study of post-Soviet postcolonialism, “It is difficult to theorize a silence — that is, this lack of dialogue between current postcolonial critique and scholarship on Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia.”<sup>16</sup> In her remarkable *Imagining the Balkans* Maria Todorova rejects the idea of employing categories such as colonialism and

imperialism in the discussion of the Balkans. She contends that “the Balkans are Europe, are part of Europe, although, admittedly, for the past several centuries its provincial part or periphery” and that the Balkan peoples never perceived themselves as being colonial or subaltern.<sup>17</sup> While it is true that their self-perception might have differed from the way Westerners regarded them, they experienced many times in their histories that the gap between them and “Europe” was quite daunting. More recently, as Roumiana Deltcheva explains, “A decade after the collapse of the Soviet empire, the cultural discourse of Central and East Europe continues to be permeated by one dominant metaphor of intent, namely the road to Europe.”<sup>18</sup>

The Habsburg Empire, like the Russian and Ottoman empires, was a dynastic one that acquired its vast areas by expanding its borders — often competing for the same lands with its counterparts to the east, rather than conquering territories overseas.<sup>19</sup> The difficulty of discussing the Habsburg Empire in colonial terms arises also from its geographical position and the constituency of its subjects. Vesna Goldsworthy argues that the Ottoman Empire represents a mirror image to its Western European colonial counterparts as an Eastern, alien, and Islamic empire that dominated parts of Europe. The relationship of the Habsburg Empire to its eastern provinces bears similarities to that of Britain to Ireland, as in each case both the “colonizer” and the “colonized” were European and predominantly Christian. By creating “colonizing narratives” that describe the “colonized” as non-European, “Asiatic,” “Balkanic,” “oriental,” and/or “barbaric,” the Austrians could find a justification for their takeover by emphasizing the importance and necessity of their civilizing mission in this backward region that geographically belongs to Europe but is culturally affiliated with Asia or the Orient. And as Goldsworthy eloquently remarks, “The take-over of the intellectual domain, the exploitation of the raw sources of history can be similarly lucrative and — precisely because it often appears frivolous — more insidious in its consequences” (x).

In chapter 1, I discuss the case of Bukovina in the context of internal colonialism. Michael Hechter introduced the term *internal colonialism* in 1975.<sup>20</sup> In a later article, coauthored with Margaret Levi, Hechter extends his definition of internal colonies of Western Europe to “relatively backward ‘nations without history.’”<sup>21</sup> Hechter and Levi explain that “Peripheries such as Ireland, Wales, Brittany, Corsica, Galicia, and Friesland were annexed outright by their respective cores. Although annexation did tend to strip these peripheries of their most culturally distinctive governmental institutions, some aspects of peripheral culture could, under specific conditions, persist none the less” (186). Galicia is the only example Hechter and Levi offer as an internal colony of the Habsburg Empire, but as I show in this chapter, Bukovina lends itself as a case study for internal colonialism as well, especially because for part of its Austrian history it was a circuit of Galicia.

While Müller's and Pedretti's texts also raise questions regarding a colonial relationship between Germans or Austro-Germans and East Central European peoples, Rezzori's texts address this issue most centrally. To illustrate aspects of the Austro-German colonial discourse in Bukovina I focus on Rezzori's representation of Bukovina in his *Blumen im Schnee* (1989). I argue that Rezzori's autobiographical text cannot be read simply as a nostalgic memoir of the author's childhood and youth in Bukovina, because it raises important historical questions about the Austrian rule in Bukovina and the status of Bukovina in the Habsburg Empire. Rezzori describes the Austrian colonial rule in Bukovina by means of the personal stories of his family members and his extraordinary gift for storytelling that weaves autobiographical, biographical, fictional, and historical aspects of this period and his life into the narrative. To investigate Rezzori's claim that Bukovina was a colony of the Habsburg Empire I draw on historical sources that argue that the historical annexation of Bukovina in 1775 was an imperialist act that disregarded any former political agreements between the principality of Moldavia and the Ottoman Porte. The economic exploitation of raw materials in Bukovina and its financial dependence on Viennese banks, which redirected their profits to the German regions of the empire, are further examples of the Austro-Germans' colonial practice in Eastern Europe.

In chapter 2, I treat Edgar Hilsenrath's autobiographical novel *Die Abenteuer des Ruben Jablonski* (1999), which sheds new light on the German-language presence in the East as it portrays the German-speaking Jews of Bukovina who remained loyal to the Habsburgs to the end. On the one hand, scholars have depicted this region as a tolerant oasis of German culture in which all nationalities lived peacefully side by side. On the other hand, anti-Semitism led to the deportation of most Jews from Bukovina, Bessarabia, and Moldavia to Transnistria. Studies of German-language literature from Bukovina focus mostly on the writings of Paul Celan and Rose Ausländer (Colin; Felstiner; Bower).<sup>22</sup> Hilsenrath's situation is unique, as he was born in Germany and fled to Bukovina in 1938 to escape Hitler's persecution. Three years later he was deported together with the Bukovinian Jews. Hilsenrath's survival narrative contributes to the cultural history of this region as it draws attention to the fate of the Eastern Jews from the Bukovinian town of Siret/Sereth and provides insights into historical questions regarding the Holocaust in Transnistria.

Whereas both Rezzori and Hilsenrath are known in the United States — Rezzori for his controversial *Memoirs of an Anti-Semite* (1981) and Hilsenrath for his first ghetto novel, *Nacht* (1964) — Erica Pedretti, the subject of chapter 3, is a less celebrated writer outside of Switzerland. Although she has lived there for much of her life, critics still call her “die Tschechin am Bielersee.” Like Rezzori's and Hilsenrath's texts, Pedretti's novel *Engste Heimat* (1995) is rooted in a specific historical, cultural, and geographical context and reflects

the multicultural and multilayered society of East Central Europe. By focusing on National Socialism and its impact on her homeland of Moravia, Pedretti creates two strings of narration to juxtapose different perspectives on the events of 1945, when about 3,000,000 Sudeten Germans were expelled from Czechoslovakia. Pedretti's narrative addresses the complicated history of Sudeten Germans and Czechs and challenges the legitimacy of the expulsion of many innocent Sudeten Germans, while uncovering nationalism and chauvinism on both the Czech and the Sudeten sides. Pedretti's provocative work gains even more importance because the bilateral accord on wartime abuses was signed by Germany and the Czech Republic in December 1996 and because the Czech-German-Slovak Historikerkommission was appointed in 1990 to discuss and further investigate the common history of these two peoples. Not only do Czechs and Germans apologize for the crimes committed during and after the war, but Czechs also acknowledge officially that many Sudeten Germans were killed during the transfer. Because the Sudeten German topic was dominated for a long time by the right-wing *Sudeten German Landsmannschaft*, which actually represents just a fraction of the Sudeten Germans living in Germany, the image of Sudeten Germans has been decidedly one-sided. Politically supported by the Christlich Demokratische Union and the Christlich Soziale Union, they did not engage in any constructive dialogue with the Czechs and overshadowed research institutions such as the Collegium Carolinum in Munich, which clearly distances itself from the organization's political agenda.

In chapter 4, I discuss the characters in Müller's novel *Herztier* (1994) and investigate her portrayal of the ethnocentrism and intolerance of Banat-Swabians toward other minorities, as well as toward the Romanian majority — attitudes that led to their collaboration with National Socialism during the Third Reich. The focus in Müller's writings is, however, the oppressive Communist regime of Ceaușescu, which she experienced until 1987, when she immigrated to Germany. Müller's poignant discourse of discontent, as well as her personal history as a political dissident writer, allow for a more sophisticated perspective on Communist life in Romania, which reaches a wider audience than most historical texts could achieve. I show that Müller, unlike other German-Romanian writers, does not single out German-Romanians as sole victims of this regime but differentiates between victims and "graveyard-makers," regardless of their ethnicity. In addition to being aesthetically innovative, her texts are first and foremost literary documents of political persecution, of suffering and fear under Communist dictatorial regimes. Most of Müller's ethnic German characters leave Communist Romania and "return" to the homeland of their ancestors. Their arrival, however, turns out to be a new displacement and illustrates the closing of a cycle that began centuries ago, when the first German settlers left the German lands for better prospects in Eastern Europe. Their "return" constitutes the last chapter in the history of the German presence in the East.

In a sense, the four writers are chroniclers of the histories of different regions and of a German presence that no longer exists in these areas. What Rezzori, Hilsenrath, Pedretti, and Müller have in common is the language in which they write and the German and Habsburg cultures that were preserved — with regional variations — for centuries in East Central Europe. Their writings document a German past in these regions that ties and opens German literature and culture to cultural settings influenced by Slavs, Romanians, Turks, Jews, Greeks, and other non-German peoples. This study seeks to contribute to the discussion of German identity in East Central Europe and encourages a more differentiated understanding of literature in German — one that takes into consideration the German presence in East Central Europe and opens German-language cultural history to Eastern texts and contexts.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Klaus J. Bade, ed., *Deutsche im Ausland — Fremde in Deutschland* (Munich: Beck, 1992), 405.

<sup>2</sup> Following the motto *Heim ins Reich*, the Nazis used a considerable number of *Volksdeutsche* to “germanize” occupied territories such as Poland. In 1943 Hitler granted German citizenship to all foreigners who served in the German army, the Waffen-SS, or the Organisation Todt. For more information on the involvement of East Central European Germans with National Socialism, see Anthony Komjathy and Rebecca Stockwell, *German Minorities and the Third Reich* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1980). See also the more recent work of Vladis O. Lumans, *Himmler’s Auxiliaries: The Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle and the German National Minorities of Europe, 1933–1945* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> According to Komjathy and Stockwell, who refer to Theodor Schieder’s *Dokumentation der Vertreibung der Deutschen aus Ost-Mitteleuropa* (Bonn: Bundesministerium für Vertriebene und Kriegsgeschädigte, 1956), there had been about 54,000 German-Romanians in the Waffen-SS and 15,000 in the German army and the Organisation Todt, which, combined, equaled 10 percent of Banat-Swabians and Transylvanian Saxons (123–24).

<sup>4</sup> See the book of the exhibit on German-speaking Jewish authors from Bukovina edited by Ernest Wichner and Herbert Wiesner, *In der Sprache der Mörder: Ausstellungsbuch* (Berlin: Literaturhaus Berlin, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> Heidrun Suhr, “*Ausländerliteratur*: Minority Literature in the Federal Republic of Germany,” *New German Critique* 46 (Winter 1989): 71–103; Arlene Akiko Teraoka, “*Gastarbeiterliteratur*: The Other Speaks Back,” *Cultural Critique* 7 (Fall 1987): 77–101; Leslie A. Adelson, “Migrants’ Literature or German Literature? TOKAN’s *Tufan: Brief an einen islamischen Bruder*,” *The German Quarterly* 63.3/4 (1990): 382–89; Karen Jankowsky, “‘German’ Literature Contested,” *The German Quarterly* 70.3 (Summer 1997): 261–76; Jankowski and Carla Love, eds., *Other Germanies* (Albany: State U of New York P, 1997); Dagmar C. G. Lorenz and Renate S. Posthofen, eds., *Transforming the Center, Eroding the Margins* (Columbia, SC: