

5

Borderlands

Ossi to Wessi: "We are one people!"

Wessi to Ossi: "So are we."

Post-Wende joke told on both sides of the former border, especially in western Germany

This popular joke, one of many such witticisms to be circulated nationally and locally after the Wende, poignantly captures the heightened tensions between East and West Germans after re-unification. Drawing on the slogan of the demonstrations in the fall of 1989, "We Are One People," it expresses both the hope of unity and an increasingly common perception of two emergent (and divergent) German identities. It also reflects the asymmetrical nature of inter-German relations: while the Ossi strives to be "one" with his western neighbor, it is the Wessi who is empowered to deny this unity. Germany may be unified into one state, the joke says, but its citizens remain two separate people. The Grenze has had a haunting afterlife.

My focus in this chapter is on the border and the kinds of borderland identities it has engendered. This Grenze, a literal concrete border as well

as a symbolic construction whose meaning has changed over time,¹ has created a border region that is both a "privileged site for the articulation of national distinctions" (Sahlins 1989: 271) and a transitional zone where identity can be particularly fluid; it is a place of intense clarity as well as complicated ambiguity. This, I suggest, is the paradox of the borderland.

One of my principal aims in this chapter is to explore the creation of a literal borderland and its relationship to the borderland concept as a symbol of and metaphor for the "transition." I thus explore the development and experience of the border under socialism, noting how, over time, it came to be invested with meaning and memory. I describe events surrounding the opening of the border in 1989, the subsequent invention and maintenance of a cultural boundary between East and West, and the construction, invention, and assertion of new forms of identity. Borderland residents may be Osis or Wessis; at times they may appear to be both. In examining such contradictory and complex aspects of identity, I explore how people negotiate and manipulate a liminal condition created by the collapse of this significant frame of reference.

FROM BORDER CROSSERS TO
SCHUTZSTREIFEN RESIDENTS, 1945-1989

The "Green Border," 1945-1952

Despite the boundary fortifications that were put in place soon after Kella was transferred to Soviet rule in July 1945, the border remained more or less permeable in the immediate postwar period.² A single barrier across the road leading to Eschwege, along with a few signposts and sentry boxes, were its only demarcations. Continuing a prewar trend, regional economic ties were directed toward Hesse as villagers who were unable to secure employment at home were forced by economic necessity to seek work elsewhere. Permits to cross the border enabled locals employed or with arable land in the West to travel back and forth relatively freely. Those without passes were often able to bribe Soviet border troops or crossed the boundary illegally through the sur-

rounding hills. One woman would place a pillow in the window facing west as a signal to her son, who worked and lived in Eschwege, that it was unsafe to return home for a visit that Sunday. Residents devised different "disguises" to avoid calling attention to themselves as they headed in the direction of the border: one might carry a saw or an ax, for example, as if heading to the hills to collect firewood. Punishment if caught usually meant spending the night in the cellar of the Soviet commander's "station." In Kella this was the house closest to the border, where the Soviet troops stayed during their occupation of the village until 1949; its basement walls are still covered with the names and graffiti of apprehended border crossers. While mild compared to the life-threatening consequences of a border crossing after 1961, an undercurrent of anxiety during this period was an important component of the fear and danger associated with the border.

The following story reflects this perception, for it captures the impact of the border on everyday life during the transitional period of Soviet occupation. Told to me by Gretel Schmidt, who was in her late teens at the time, it is typical of many villagers' recollections of the early years of the border.

While the Russians were here, it was easier [to cross the border]. Sometimes it was better to go through the valley, sometimes over the hills. It all depended. But we were always afraid. . . .

I remember how my sister [who worked in Eschwege] was so homesick and wanted to come home [for the weekend]. We used to put on plays in the [public] hall here—my mother was the manager—and my sister wanted to come. While we were having our dress rehearsal a child came into the hall behind the stage and said to my mother: "Aunt Marie, the Russians have Annie!"

My mother dropped everything and went to see the commander. My sister, she wasn't so afraid. She wasn't yet familiar with the facts of life. . . . My mother came in, and the commander said—he had a lot of nerve—[he would let her out] "for a bottle of Schnapps." We didn't have anything, but my mother borrowed the money—a bottle of Schnapps cost 100 marks back then—and offered it to him so she could buy my sister's freedom. But he said, "No."

As my mother left she saw the cook—he was a soldier—and he said, "Poor Fräulein. Commander devil." He was a good guy, and my mother said, "Two bottles of Schnapps?" He said, "Maybe."

Mother went to get two more bottles of Schnapps from the restaurant while the cook kept the commander occupied. She put them on the kitchen table, sneaked in, and opened the basement door and yelled, "Come on, Annie!"

They ran home, and mother yelled, "Close all the doors! I stole Annie from the cellar!" I gave my sister my dress—I remember it as if it was yesterday—I was wearing a blue checkered dress. Suddenly they were knocking on our door—like thunder! My sister was so scared she ran into the closest room. My brother was there, too, and he told her to jump out the window! And it was pretty far up, that window. So she jumped out the window—and landed right in front of people who were going to see the play! She hid behind the stage in the hall.

[They questioned us]—I was crying from fear—and then went to look for my sister in the hall. It was packed with people. But it couldn't start until we arrived. My mother said to my brother: "Go get her and bring her over [the border]. The air is clear now because they're all down here [in the village]." So my brother fetched her and brought her back to Eschwege that night [over the hills]. . . . That must have been in the winter of 1947.

Border crossers included not only locals employed in the West but also refugees and evacuees from the Sudeten region and Silesia, among other areas. Villagers who were able to navigate the hilly terrain and/or negotiate with Soviet border guards served as guides for these illegal border crossings, often for a hefty fee. Other locals smuggled goods across the border; the sale of produce, eggs, and homemade wurst in the West was a way of earning a little extra income in difficult economic times. Stories of thieves and rapists lurking in the woods, which were confirmed by the arrest of one sex offender in a neighboring western village who had posed as a border guide, added to the sense of the border as a place of danger and fear.

As the cold war intensified and its front line became increasingly demarcated, the inter-German border grew less permeable. With the founding of the two separate German states in 1949, Soviet border troops yielded their authority to the newly formed East German People's Police. According to older villagers, the introduction of German efficiency (or "Prussian thoroughness") made it much more difficult to cross the border illegally.³ Many villagers employed in West Germany chose to stay there permanently, leaving behind close friends, family, and, in a

few instances, even young children. Between 1945 and 1952 Kella lost one-quarter of its population.⁴ Others returned only on weekends under the cover of darkness after border police officers had abandoned their posts for the night. Parents began sending their children to smuggle goods or people over the border because children were not punished if caught. Many villagers' childhood memories are thus full of border tales: of crouching behind trees in the snow to avoid being seen by passing patrols, of feigning illness to support a story about having to get to a hospital in Eschwege, of whispering repeated Hail Marys to ease their fear of the dark woods. One woman, assigned the routine task of delivering belongings to relatives at the border, recalled defecating in her pants when she realized that a Soviet army officer might catch her with a baby carriage full of bedding.

The Border Becomes Impermeable, 1952–1961

When the border became largely impermeable in 1952, many villagers say they were relieved. "As bad as it was," one woman recalled, "people said, 'At least it means that it's finally over with this [back and forth].' While it was still open there was always the temptation, but once it was closed, no one could go anymore."

The year 1952 is indelibly etched into villagers' memories, even those not old enough to have experienced it. Not only was it the year in which two families were deported and three families fled from Kella, as we saw in chapter 2; it was also a turning point in the fortification of the border. On the same day that West Germany joined the European Defense Community (May 26, 1952), the GDR Council of Ministries issued an order for the "Regulation of Measures on the Demarcation Line between the German Democratic Republic and the Western Occupied Zones of Germany" (Hartmann and Künsting 1990: 369). This state directive created the five-kilometer-deep Sperrgebiet zone as well as the highly restricted 500-meter Schutzstreifen. It invalidated all permits to cross the border and resulted in the evacuation of thousands of border residents during May and June of that year. The demarcation of the increasingly fortified border began that summer with the creation of a ten-meter-wide "control strip" along the boundary line; it was cleared of all vegetation and filled

with carefully groomed sand. Shortly thereafter, a barbed-wire fence was installed along the entire length of the inter-German border.

In Kella, as in other border villages, men from the community were employed in a work brigade to assist in the construction of the control strip. One man from the village recalled: "The tree stumps were blown up, and there wasn't enough soil left over so they had to carry dirt up [the hill] in baskets. They also had to bring all sorts of gardening tools with them. The ten-meter strip was made into something like cultivated garden soil—so that you could see every footprint, every impression. And it was patrolled regularly . . . usually by three [officers]."

Despite the tightening of control, there were still isolated incidents of border crossings. In the memories of most villagers, however, 1952 marks the date the border became impermeable. "After '52, nobody went [back and forth] anymore," many older villagers told me. The growing impermeability of the border encouraged several village residents who had been employed and living in the West to return permanently to Kella in order to avoid being cut off from Heimat and family indefinitely. Records in the village archives indicate that more than twenty-five people had returned to Kella by 1961. "These were people who came from here," one man explained, "who said [to themselves], 'Go home. Mother and father have property that I'm supposed to inherit.' . . . An Eichsfelder is very attached to his Heimat."

By the time the Berlin Wall went up in August 1961, the fortification of the inter-German border was nearly complete. In 1957, the passport law of the GDR was changed to characterize any illegal border crossing as "Republikflucht," punishable by imprisonment. A year later, the state instituted Grenzhelfer, a means by which civilians could assist in boundary maintenance and patrol. Border police were armed with assault guns and tank gunners by 1958. In the years before the building of the Berlin Wall, there were an estimated eleven to fifteen fatalities on the inter-German border.⁵

After the erection of the Berlin Wall, the state put up an additional border fence at the foot of the hills surrounding Kella. A guard tower was built and guard dog runs installed to assist in surveillance. Because of its hilly terrain and the "stability" of its population (determined by the relatively low number of attempted and successful Republikfluchten), the

village managed to avoid the planting of trip-wires and land mines that fortified much of the inter-German border. Kella also escaped a second wave of Schutzstreifen evacuations in 1961, although its residents were aware of deportations from neighboring villages. Furthermore, the intensification of controls along the border was accompanied by a tightening of control in other spheres of daily life: curfew ordinances, control checkpoints, and the proliferation of mass political organizations were evidence of growing state power and presence.

In many respects, the years between 1952 and 1961 were a transitional period in which the reality and materiality of the border became a part of everyday life. Except for those who departed or returned permanently, border crossings ceased. By 1961 the barbed-wire fence at the base of the woods signified to residents of this Schutzstreifengemeinde not only the sharp division of Germany into two separate states but also, I was often told, that Kella had become the place "where the world ended."

Boundary Maintenance and Normalization, 1961–1989

In the next decades leading up to the fall of the Wall, the Grenze and its fortifications became increasingly intensified and normalized. Two new rows of iron fencing and a concrete road for army jeep patrols were added in the mid-1970s; the more eastern of the two fences, in many places located within yards of villagers' homes or gardens, was armed with an optical and acoustic alarm system as well as multiple rows of barbed wire. A sand strip, carefully groomed and regularly patrolled by border guards as well as Grenzhelfer, lay directly in front of this alarm fence on its eastern side (Figure 12). Villagers grew accustomed to the flashing lights and sirens usually set off by rabbits, cats, or wild animals until the army cut holes at the base of this alarm fence to prevent small animals from setting off the alarm. The second fence, which ran along the base of the wooded hills rising west and southwest of the village, was three meters high and was topped with barbed wire (Figure 13). The immediate area around this fence was cleared of all vegetation, often with toxic exfoliants, while the no-man's-land between the fences was maintained by the collective farm as a grazing pasture. Only



Figure 12. The alarm fence in Kella, with the sand strip, 1989. Behind it is one of the Stations of the Cross leading to the chapel. (Photograph courtesy of Gisela Lange)

LPG employees with spouses and children in Kella (who were thus considered at low risk to attempt an escape) were permitted into this area.

In order to hinder escapes by citizens outside the Sperrgebiet, all road signs directing traffic to Kella were removed. "Pointing in the direction of Kella was essentially telling people where the border was," a villager explained, "and the state didn't want that." Kella was no longer featured on most East German maps for the same reason; publishers often conveniently placed the map's symbols key or alphabetical listing in the spot corresponding to Sperrgebiet villages. Thus Kella was, in the words of many locals, "on the arse of the world."

In GDR state rhetoric, the border was a "protective shield against the western imperialists," or a division between "workers and imperialists." The state justified the institution and maintenance of the Sperrgebiet and Schutzstreifen by claiming that the borderland was dangerously close to the enemy. As one man recalled, "We were simply told that because we

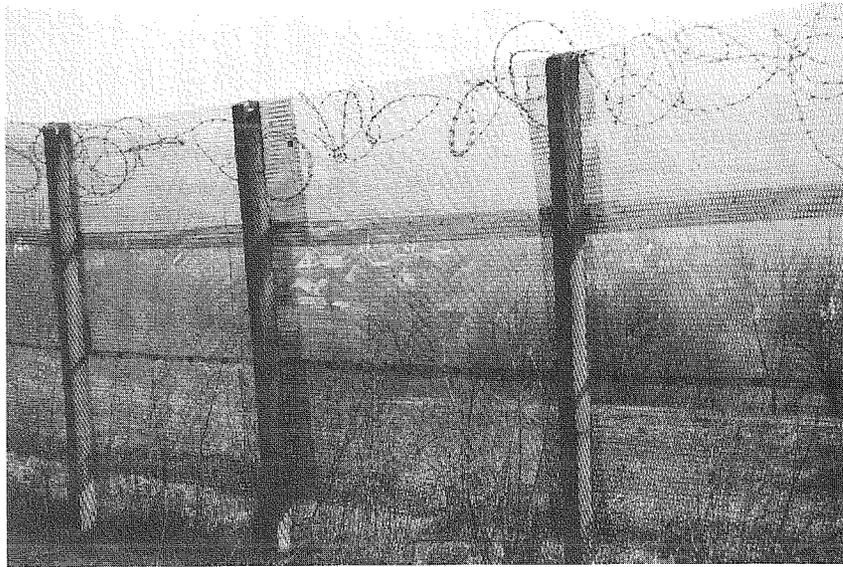


Figure 13. Kella as seen from the western side of the border through the three-meter-high fence, 1991. (Photograph by the author)

were here in the immediate proximity of the enemy, imperialism, we needed to have peace and order here. That one needed exact information about who is moving about here and where." He added, with emphasis, "but the barbs were pointed at us, not toward the other side." The direction of the fence's barbed wire was often pointed out to me as evidence of the state's attempts to deceive its citizens; it also suggested a certain degree of the state's own self-deception. "We all knew they just wanted to keep people from escaping," one older woman explained.

Nevertheless, the state was often successful in inculcating its border ideology into the younger generation. As one woman in her late twenties, Anna Biermann, recalled:

For me, the Wall was built between the workers, who had all been in concentration camps, who wanted their freedom, the little people, and the big ones on the other side . . . capitalists, Nazis. That's how I understood it back then. That's how it was explained to us in geography or his-

tory. . . . By the time I was eighteen or nineteen, though, I didn't really see it that way any more. By that time I realized people there [in the West] were just people too.

The children of the villagers whose childhood memories are full of border crossings thus grew up with a different view of the Grenze. Once, when the wind carried sounds of drums and fanfare across the border from the western side, for example, some children assumed it meant war. Because of incessant antiwestern propaganda in the GDR, an apparent West German military exercise that was visible from Kella in the mid-1970s was terrifying to many villagers, especially children. "The entire village was in a panic," Anna remembered, "because the tanks' gun barrels were pointed toward Kella. [The teachers] told us in school the next day that they [the West Germans] just wanted to scare us and show off their fighting power, that they probably wouldn't shoot at us."

For many children born in the 1970s and 1980s, too young to have experienced such cold war confrontations or the intensification of the border's fortification, the Grenze was simply a fact of life. "I never even asked why we couldn't go to Eschwege," one teenager told me, "I didn't know anything else. The border was something totally normal." In many cases, children only began to question the existence and purpose of the border after hearing stories of their parents' or grandparents' border crossings.

On the western side of the border, the boundary was being maintained in a different fashion. West German Federal Border Police erected boundary markers and warning signs to visitors to keep out of GDR territory. More important was the creation and designation of a viewing point on the Braunrode hill from which westerners could gaze down on and ponder the Otherness of the East. A parking lot large enough to accommodate several tour buses was installed, and a restaurant was opened in an adjacent house. Referred to as the "Window to Kella," this site, like other viewing points along the Grenze, was nearly as important in demarcating the boundary as the fence itself. It not only provided a place for former residents to look to, often through binoculars, in the hope of recognizing a familiar face but also turned Kella and the socialist East in general into a spectacle, a tourist site to be viewed from the "safety" of

the West. It was part of what Borneman has called a "mirror imaging process" in the construction of two German states and identities (1992); it was also the beginning of the construction of Otherness on both sides of the border.

As a result of this visibility, the state attempted to turn Kella into a kind of Potemkin village. It offered extra incentives and provided scarce building materials to modernize house facades visible to the West, for example, and subsidized community-improvement projects like the renovation of the village cemetery. As with East Berlin, the state granted this area certain preferential treatment, when possible, in supplying it with consumer goods. "They wanted to keep us quiet," one villager explained. "Our Konsum sometimes carried beer, wine, or fruit that people outside the Schutzstreifen didn't get."

The peculiar physical isolation of Kella's borderland location could not fully hinder the influx of a variety of external influences. The border, for example, was porous to the airwaves of West German television and radio. Western radio was usually the sole source of music and was eagerly but poorly reproduced on low-quality East German cassette tapes. Western television, watched by most villagers throughout the socialist period despite the fact that it was not officially permitted until Erich Honecker became Communist Party leader in 1971, provided a source of entertainment (and village nicknames, as we saw in the previous chapter), as well as information about and a connection to the West. American television shows like *Dallas* and *Dynasty* competed with East German reports on crime and homelessness in the United States. Although both were exaggerated representations, people tended to reject the East German reports as propaganda and accept American television fairly uncritically. Similarly, West German news was regarded as "real" news, whereas East German news was only watched if children were required to report on it in school.⁶ Advertisements and commercials were regular and painful reminders of the superior quality and availability of consumer goods within walking distance on the other side of the border. "The commercials made a big impression," one woman told me. "We'd learn about how every year there was a new car model [in the West] while our Trabis stayed the same." A common joke told in the GDR reflected this influence: "Marxism would work if it weren't for cars."

More than anything else, western television helped maintain the illusion of the "Golden West." Western goods, which crossed boundaries in *Westpakete* (packages from western relatives), in stuffed suitcases of returning retirees, and later in the state-run elite stores, seemed to confirm the images on western television. "It was like Christmas," one woman recalled, "every time Grandma returned with her suitcase full of things. We couldn't believe everything they had over there." Just on the other side of the border was a world where "everything shines," a paradise that, if attained, could solve most every problem.

Over time, the presence of the border was routinized; it was an irritating, mysterious, and potentially dangerous fact of daily life. Although a genuine element of fear surrounding the border remained, particularly for parents with teenage boys (those most likely to attempt an escape), in daily life the border and its restrictive regulations were usually regarded more as nuisances than as the sources of pain and suffering that the border came to symbolize after the *Wende*. Depending on the degree of state control, which fluctuated largely in response to local behavior,⁷ social gatherings had to end by an 11 P.M. curfew; lovers were forced to say their good-byes at the control checkpoint because passes were not available to nonfamily members (even for an unmarried father of a child living with its mother in Kella); dances and other festivities in neighboring villages had to be missed when villagers were required to be home by sundown.

People experienced and negotiated the spatial and temporal reconfigurations of the border in a variety of ways. Spatial practices were transformed as villagers sought new paths through woods or gardens after curfew. New routes outside the Schutzstreifen were discovered for Sunday walks. Weddings and other large family gatherings were held in Heiligenstadt or Erfurt so that relatives from outside Kella could attend. People working in their garden plots near the border would hope, imagine, or pretend that the figures they noticed but could not recognize or acknowledge on the other side were long-lost western relatives. Others who did recognize the onlookers through the lenses of binoculars, or who were expecting a "visit" from a western relative, would wave by washing windows or by shaking out tablecloths.

Then there were people like Ralf Fischer, a border crosser of the imag-

ination and a traveler of maps. In the comfort of his living room, whose windows offered one of the best views of the border and the Braunrode hill in Kella, Ralf spent hours pouring over maps of worlds inaccessible to him as a GDR citizen and resident of a place that was not even featured on most maps produced in his own country. While stationed in East Berlin during his army service, he would wait outside a bookstore starting at 4 A.M. on the day he knew they were to receive a shipment of new and often illicit maps. With these maps and the power of his imagination, he journeyed through Asia, South America, and, most frequently, across the United States. He was so well traveled, in fact, that his knowledge of U.S. geography was far superior to mine. When my husband and I once explained to him that we had attended colleges in different cities before we were married and could only visit each other on semester breaks, he astonished us by observing, "Oh, then you must have taken I-80."

Border Stories

In addition to being a fact of life with which, like the system itself, people struggled to make their peace, the border was also the stuff of stories and legends.⁸ Border crossers from the immediate postwar era related their experiences to the younger generation and, in the presence of peers, often tried to outdo one another's horror stories (several of which have been recounted here). Legends circulated about illicit border crossings, like the one about a man who was able to cross the newly formed ten-meter sand strip by attaching pig's hooves to the bottom of his shoes, thus leaving only the footprints of a wild boar. Even within families, stories could be so transformed in their telling that they had become legends, indeed fictions, by the time they were repeated several generations later. In one instance a young girl, Cornelia, had been left to live with an unmarried aunt when her parents decided to remain permanently in the West in 1952. According to several older family members, as well as Cornelia herself, the parents had opted to leave their daughter in Kella: "They already had two children and one on the way," an aunt explained, "and Aunt Marie had no children, so they left Cornelia with her." When Cornelia's younger cousin in Kella first related the story to me, however, the family had nearly been caught fleeing Kella and was

unable to return to retrieve the missing child. According to this narrative, the family had been victimized by the dangerous and evil nature of the border and those who guarded it. In a manner similar to the imagined "lists" and monthly reports discussed in chapter 2, an imagined past and perception of danger not only embellished border stories but also endowed the border with an aura of evil and danger even during times when it may have been unwarranted.

In addition to an aura of danger, stories of escapes over the border similarly invested it with a sense of mystery. After 1961, according to archival sources as well as recollections of villagers, there were approximately ten to twelve incidents of Republikflucht in Kella. They included two young women whose friendship with a border guard worked to their advantage when they persuaded him to join them; a young man whose despair at not receiving his choice of apprenticeships prompted him to seek a new life in West Germany; a young man who left as he saw the alarm fence going up; and Cornelia, the child abandoned by her parents in 1952, who crept over the border with a friend one night in 1969. There were no fatalities on the border near Kella. Most escapes took place during the 1960s, before the erection of the two metal fences made it nearly impossible to leave without being caught.

The most celebrated escapes are those that occurred after this final fortification. The last Republikflucht from Kella was in 1986, when a young man in his midtwenties, Dieter Lenz, successfully dismantled the signal fence's alarm system and surmounted the second three-meter barrier. A trained electrician, Dieter had been planning his escape for a long time. He watched the border for months, taking careful notes on when and how it was patrolled. With materials obtained from his workplace, he constructed hooks to use in scaling the three-meter fence. His electrician's knowledge and awareness of certain functions of the border gained from service in the army several years earlier—it was not totally uncommon for young men from Kella to serve as border guards elsewhere—provided the information he needed for disarming the alarm system. Over a period of days, he slowly cut a hole in the alarm fence, snipping away just inches at a time, and concealed the spot with a pile of bushes and branches when he was finished. According to several accounts of the story, he did such a good job of hiding this spot that border

guards had a difficult time locating it after he was gone. Dieter's best friend, who declined at the last minute to join him, was the only other person aware of his intentions. His mother learned about the escape on the next morning's (West German) television news.

The story I was most frequently told concerned the attempted, or rather aborted, escape of Martin Schneider, the youth mentioned in chapter 2 who was sentenced to a year in prison for tossing his jeans over the alarm fence in 1983. Perhaps this tale was recounted so often because, more than any other, it illustrated for residents the potential danger of the border, its relation to state power, and, most importantly, the possible consequences of transgressions. Despite daily contact with and observance of the border and its operations, much of the border remained a mystery. Like the system itself, it was something that had to be deciphered and interpreted as well as negotiated. Border stories were a means of doing this.

Whatever the narrative's content, stories and legends of the border invested this intensely symbolic space with meaning and memory.⁹ With each telling, a story became embedded in a culturally constructed landscape. Edward Bruner's description of the relationship between stories and sites helps explain a similar interaction here: "Names may construct the landscape but stories make the site resonate with history and experience. Stories introduce a temporal dimension, making sites the markers of the experiences of groups and historical persons, not just markers of space. In spite of the inevitable changes that occur with each retelling of the story, the now culturally constituted landscape, in its solid materiality and sequentiality, authenticates the story" (1984: 5).

Together with the border's constant presence in everyday life—the effects of which ranged from the extraordinary to the mundane—border stories were a process through which the very materiality of the Grenze was physically impressed on the consciousness of border dwellers; the border was a primary means through which state power was inscribed onto space and bodies. The presence of the border in everyday life was so internalized by people living here, in fact, that a year after the Wall fell some people were still taking their feet off the gas pedal or reaching for their identity cards when they approached the site where a Schutzstreifen control point used to be located.

Like other symbols, therefore, meaning is not inherent in boundaries but is invested in them through cultural practices. In this sense, the border and its stories are an instance of what James Fernandez has described as "the conditions that make practical artifacts and arenas, and the signals and signs of coordinated human interaction, into evocative symbols with historic resonance" (1990: 95). As these border stories demonstrate, territorial borders may take on cultural meanings beyond their political purposes. They may even generate meanings that did not exist before their construction,¹⁰ and their disappearance may be so destabilizing as to generate new cultural practices and identities. We now turn to the creation and expression of such meanings.

FROM BORDER DWELLERS TO BORDER CROSSERS

The opening of the border on November 9, 1989, created opportunities to invest this culturally constructed space with new meanings and memories. Tellings and retellings of border stories, both old and new, often entailed a complex and dynamic interplay between cultural representations and lived experience. The border and its impact on everyday life became a central aspect of a local identifying narrative, a reference point for people to tell themselves stories about themselves.

The following section discusses the events surrounding the Wende and the opening of the borders near Kella.¹¹ I explore how, amid the euphoria surrounding the fall of the Wall, initial border crossings both reflected and established the dynamics of East and West German post-Wall relations. These border crossings also initiated certain practices as rites into the new society, particularly in the realm of consumption, where differences between East and West were most marked before and immediately after the fall of the Wall.

The Wall Falls

Unlike the majority of border crossings throughout Germany on November 9 and 10, most of the first crossings for Kella were from West to East. For days after the Wall fell, the village was full of curious

West Germans who were anxious to see up close the place they had often peered down on from their side of the fence. Western relatives on an emotional return to their Heimat were also part of this influx of visitors. The euphoria in Kella, stemming not only from the elimination of travel restrictions to the West but also from the end of the village's isolation as a Schutzstreifengemeinde, paralleled the feelings and expressions of elation throughout the country: strangers embraced spontaneously on the streets, villagers invited visitors into their homes for coffee and conversation, and siblings and cousins were reunited at the highly symbolic *Elternhaus* (home of one's parents).¹² For western border crossers, a trip to the East was often a nostalgic journey into the past: "It reminds me of my childhood"; "I haven't seen anything like this for thirty years"; or "Look! Remember these?" were frequent remarks of westerners.

Similarly for East Germans, crossing the border into the West was like going back to the future. The modern houses, paved roads, elaborate shop windows, and bountiful supply of coveted western products held promises of what might have been, as well as of what might be. The West was a giant curiosity cabinet; with the 100 marks of *Begrüßungsgeld* (welcome money) offered to each East German citizen by the FRG during a first visit to West Germany and spontaneous gifts from West Germans—in the days following the fall of the Wall, it was not uncommon for West Germans spontaneously to hand out ten or twenty marks (or more) to perfect strangers from the GDR—it seemed both oddly distant and almost free for the taking.

The following letter, written just days after the fall of the Wall, captures and conveys the excitement, euphoria, impressions, and experiences of many first-time border crossers. It is from Thorsten Müller, a young man in his midtwenties, and is addressed to his cousin and her husband, who were living in West Germany.¹³

13 November 1989

Dear Hildesheimers!

Warm greetings from Thorsten and Katje!¹⁴ I've been wanting to write you for weeks, but the events have occurred at such a rapid pace that one couldn't even think normally. The culmination of course happened

this weekend. Whenever I think of it I still get tears in my eyes. I don't even know where to start.

[I remember when Christoph¹⁵ was still here and we would go up to our garden where we would always look to the West—which seemed so close and yet was unreachable. Only once to be able to see Kella from the other side seemed as unlikely as being able to fly to the moon.

Then on Thursday I watched the "opening" of the Wall and the whole confusion on TV until 2 A.M. It was impossible to believe. . . .

Friday morning it was announced on the public-address system that the Sperrgebiet had been lifted. The joy here knew no boundaries. . . .

But I didn't want to go [the West] right away. To be honest, I was scared to see everything. And I was totally irritated at how everyone was after the 100 western marks. . . . It's humiliating to get rich from your tax money. If we could at least have exchanged for it. . . . Maybe [the West Germans] will destroy the GDR this way. It's like an investment. They buy the GDR citizens (their sympathy), and then they won't want to remain GDR citizens anymore. . . .

Anyway, I didn't want to go over to the West right away, but Katje talked me into it, especially when we heard that another border crossing had been opened near Heiligenstadt. We filled up the tank and left around 1 P.M. After four hours of stop-and-go traffic we came to the GDR control point, where they let us through without having to show our identity card, even without stopping. For us it was unbelievable. After a few hundred meters we came to the provisional western control point. It was absolutely insane. It was already dark, and still there were people standing at the border shouting for joy. We honked and yelled. It was simply unbelievable. I was shaking so much I could hardly drive. People waved and greeted us more warmly than I've ever experienced. I had to fight back the tears.

It was great to drive on the western streets. We kept wondering what we should do. . . . I wanted to come to Hildesheim, but I was afraid we wouldn't be able to find you. . . . We decided to go to Göttingen . . . where we stopped at a rest area. How the parking lot was laid out, the neon signs, all the amazing cars. I walked around as if I were drunk.

Katje absolutely wanted to go to a McDonald's restaurant [located at the rest area]. She stormed in, and I stood outside just opening my eyes as wide as I could. I was shaking so. It was all so modern, white and made of glass, the windows were so amazing, the roof was constructed in a way that's only familiar to us through western newspapers. Katje pulled me inside. I felt like a lost convict who'd just spent twenty-five years in prison. Katje had some money that we used to buy a Big Mac.

I'm sure we behaved in such a way that everyone could see where we came from. Above all, I was in such a state of shock that I was stumbling over everything.

When we were back in the car and heading for the city center we passed numerous car dealers. It's a miracle I could still drive. We went for a walk downtown where all the shops are. It's good that the shops were closed because we wouldn't have known what to do. . . .

Traffic wasn't so bad on the way home. At the border crossing there were still FRG people standing, waving and shouting as we yelled good-bye. It was an amazing experience, and I hope it was a step forward in history. Let's hope the mandatory [currency] exchange is abolished for you, or even better that the whole border will disappear . . . but that's probably too much to ask for. In any case, you're welcome to visit us any time now, . . .

See you soon!
Thorsten!

Thorsten's euphoric letter not only captures his own experience as a first-time border crosser and resonates with the elation experienced and expressed throughout Germany during this time but also addresses several important themes and issues surrounding the fall of the Wall and its aftermath. His discussion of the Begrüßungsgeld, for example, highlights some of the early power dynamics of East-West relations. Long before the fall of the Wall, of course, there existed a power imbalance between the East and West. The exchange of people for western currency, loans, and even Westpakete were reflective of this; the Begrüßungsgeld from the West German state as well as spontaneous gifts of cash from individual West Germans was a continuation of the trend (Borneman 1993; 1998). As gifts that could not be reciprocated, these gestures accentuated the discrepancies between East and West and placed westerners in the dominant position of gift-givers. As one villager explained: "I found the Begrüßungsgeld embarrassing. It made me feel like a beggar. And when a westerner tried to hand me 20 marks, telling me to buy something nice with it, I tried to give it back. I was so ashamed."

More than a year later, these power dynamics resulting from uneven exchanges still informed many encounters between eastern and western Germans. While shopping in Eschwege, for example, a young woman

from Kella, Helga Schneider, ran into a woman who for years had sent her family gifts from West Germany. The wife of an old friend of Helga's grandfather, the woman was well dressed with heels, light but noticeable makeup, and a fur coat. I noticed Helga's instant awkwardness and nervousness on greeting her. After listening to Helga's brief update on the family in response to her inquiry, the woman said, "We may have some more things to pass on to you, but I'll have to check with my son first. But now you don't need them as much as you used to." Helga, whose face had turned crimson with embarrassment, thanked the woman profusely for the offer but assured her this would not be necessary. "I'll look—I think we might have something," were the woman's departing words. Once out of earshot, Helga, still visibly flustered from the encounter, informed me how embarrassing this woman's charity was to her, however well intentioned. "They think we are so needy and dependent," Helga said, "I wish she wouldn't only talk about giving us things."

Like this brief encounter, Thorsten's letter also reveals an implicit assumption—shared by westerners and easterners—of western dominance defined by economic prosperity and material abundance. The notion of a time warp, prevalent in West German discourses and reflected in Thorsten's statement of feeling like a convict entering society after twenty-five years of imprisonment, also underlined the superiority of the West. It was clearly up to East Germans to catch up with, adapt to, and later simply adopt this system.

Certain initiation rites thus became part of East Germans' entry into the new society, and Thorsten's letter reflects the beginnings of several such rituals. Above all, he alludes to the centrality of consumption as an organizing category and metaphor for East-West distinctions. He is disgusted by his countrymen's "consuming frenzy" and lust for the almighty D-Mark, yet he marvels at the fancy automobiles, flashy advertisements, and elaborate shop windows of the West. His first stop after crossing the border is at McDonald's, a potent symbol of western capitalist expansion and consumption.¹⁶ The fact that he and Katje did not know what to do at McDonald's reveals the lack of a certain cultural fluency in consumption that made them easily identifiable as East Germans—a marker that would become increasingly significant in the months to follow.

The centrality of consumption in Thorsten's letter echoes both media representations and other individual accounts of the events surrounding the fall of the Wall. One of the most pervasive images at the time was that of East Germans possessed by a cargo-cult mentality on a frenetic collective shopping spree.¹⁷ As depicted especially in the West German press, the triumph of capitalism and democracy was reflected and confirmed in their lust for all things western. Local as well as national newspapers carried numerous photographs of East Germans gawking at western products. As one headline read: "Waiting, Marveling, Buying." The first thing most villagers note in recollecting their first visit to the West—whether before the Wende on a special pass or after the fall of the Wall—is the "huge offering" of products. "The stores!" one young woman recalled, "I didn't want to leave them!"

Finally, Thorsten's letter hints at a ritual unique to the borderland and cherished in Kella. He mentions how he had dreamed of being able to view Kella from the other side of the border—which, just days after writing the letter, he did. "One of the first things I did after the borders opened," he later told me, "was to go to Braunrode. I looked for the exact spot where my western relatives would have stood when they came to look at Kella. And when I found it, I couldn't fight back the tears." Thorsten was repeating a ritual already established by villagers who had been to the West on special passes before the Wende. During a brief visit for his uncle's seventieth birthday, for example, one villager recalled the view from the "Window to Kella": "I will always remember this impression. I looked through the binoculars and could see my son coming home, my wife outside the house. That was only three years ago. Here is where the world ended."

A Border Crossing in Kella

The creation of a border crossing in Kella on December 30, 1989, was the final step in ending the village's physical isolation, the day when Kella officially ceased to be "at the end of the world." Until then, villagers had to go to the Katharinenberg crossing, approximately eleven kilometers away. Soon after the borders opened in November, residents began to demand the creation of a border crossing near their village. In

the security provided by the regime's open demise, between 150 and 200 villagers took to the streets in a candlelight procession on November 22.¹⁸ Shouting spontaneous chants like: "For forty years we've been dead, to Braunrode now, we want to head!" and, "This is where a crossing should be! We in Kella long to be free!" they marched to the alarm fence that cut across the path where the road to Eschwege had once been. On the other side, "on Braunrode," residents from western border villages gathered in support of their demands.

Following a rapid trend all along the inter-German border, an opening was scheduled for Kella at the end of December. Under the supervision of the still operational but nearly defunct NVA border guards, volunteers from East and West spent three days clearing the brush, cement slabs, and fencing that had made the once frequently traveled road to Eschwege unrecognizable. Residents from both sides gathered to watch the long-anticipated first cut in the fence on December 27. "That was the most interesting moment of the whole opening," one participant observed: "Even though the official opening wasn't until the thirtieth [of December], the newspapers had announced we'd be cutting through the fence that day. It was absolute chaos. Even the Eschwege brewery set up a booth in the Braunrode parking lot! I tried to maintain some order so we could get our work done, but I finally gave up when a colleague said, 'Today the people rule!'"

The official opening was attended by hundreds of people from East and West (Figure 14). Funded by donations from nearly every household in Kella, festivities began with speeches by government officials from Heiligenstadt and Eschwege (including the newly elected district president, a former resident of Kella¹⁹) that stressed the importance of "coming together"; the speeches were followed by a procession though the new border opening led by a brass band from a nearby western village. The village place-name sign that once read "Kella, Kreis Heiligenstadt" (Kella, District of Heiligenstadt) was temporarily replaced by a West German one that read "Meinhard, Ortsteil Kella" (Meinhard, Subdivision of Kella). A gift from a western village mayor, the sign included Kella within the West German municipality of Meinhard and was intended to assure villagers that they "now belonged to the West."

In an atmosphere of spontaneous communitas (Turner 1979), villagers



Figure 14. Opening a border crossing in Kella, December 1990. (Photograph in the collection of the author)

and their guests sought to extend the euphoria of the initial fall of the Wall. Residents handed out food and drink prepared for days in advance to a packed house of festival participants. "People were just amazing in those days," one woman recalled. "We really tried to make them feel welcome here." Or as another villager, Peter Meyer, remarked with surprise and irony while watching a videotape of the border opening more than a year later, "Look! So many people from East and West—and they get along!"

"THE WALL IN OUR HEADS"

Borderline Conflicts

In the borderland, as throughout Germany (and as Peter's remark indicates), the euphoria surrounding the fall of the Wall soon subsided.²⁰ The welcoming, emotional embraces of the early days were replaced with animosity, resentment, and in many cases aggression. West

German discourses began projecting East Germans as inferior, backward, and lazy. A host of legal, political, and discursive practices reflected a systematic devaluation of the East German past that challenged some of the very foundations of easterners' identity and personhood. Such practices included the selling of East German factories to western companies by the Treuhand, occasionally for next to nothing;²¹ the discrediting of the GDR educational system, particularly the restructuring of the universities;²² the renaming of schools, streets, and other public buildings; the removal of socialist memorials and monuments; the trial of Berlin border guards; the dissolution of East German media such as local newspapers and the television station DFF; the restructuring and rebuilding of urban and rural spaces following western models; and comparisons in dominant West German discourses of the socialist state with the Nazi regime.

Such devaluations of East Germans' work, values, indeed life experience, affected many villagers on a very personal level. Commenting on the village renewal plan, modeled after West German designs, for example, the former mayor of Kella, Ursula Meyer, lamented: "Everything we did [under socialism] was wrong. The streets we built were wrong, the trees we planted were wrong, even the roses we planted were wrong!" Her remark was intended metaphorically as well as literally: after the Wende, village streets constructed under socialism were repaved, while several trees and even roses planted by the village socialist administration were cut down or removed. In a similar vein, another villager remarked: "Are we supposed to say now that everyone who went to school in the GDR was an idiot? Or that all the factories in the GDR were just deadbeats? It's simply not true!"

Tensions mounted as West Germans complained about East Germans taking away their jobs by working for lower wages, while East Germans lamented the salary inequities. Villagers reported being yelled at for taking away parking spaces or for emptying stores shelves of yogurt, kiwis, and, above all, bananas. A few of the villagers who found employment in the West were refused service at their factory canteen; others had their cars sabotaged.²³ Many endured regular harassment from West German coworkers ranging from verbal attacks ("Shut up, Ossi! You don't have anything to say! You haven't done anything for forty years!") to more

subtle forms of aggression such as delegating the least desirable work to easterners or humiliating them by assigning easterners tasks requiring knowledge of unfamiliar western machinery.

Many villagers employed in the West were also subjected to numerous Ossi jokes told by their western German colleagues. A key indicator of mounting East-West tensions, many jokes entailed a reworking of classic ethnic stereotypes and prejudices in the German context.²⁴ More uniquely German, the affectionate Trabi jokes told immediately after the Wende became outright hostile, focusing no longer on the cute little car but on the driver and passengers.²⁵ Similarly, the banana became the subject of many jokes and thereby part of a discourse of Otherness that depicted East Germans as dirty, uncivilized, and apelike. "How do they know that Ossis descended from apes?" begins one joke. "The banana shelves are always empty after they've been there." Another banana jokes asks, "How can a banana act as a compass?" "If you put it on the wall the side that's bitten off is the one pointed toward the East."

Banana jokes contributed to the fruit's status as a key symbol of the events surrounding re-unification. Hours after the Berlin Wall opened in November, for example, a West German stationed himself on his side of the Wall and handed out bananas to East Germans as they crossed into the West for the first time (Darnton 1991: 317). Rarely available in socialist countries, bananas were one of the first things East Germans bought when they arrived in the West. For months after the borders opened, fruit stands and store shelves were recurrently depleted of their banana supply. West Germans began to complain about the banana consumerism of their Ossi neighbors, sometimes deriding the GDR as a "banana republic." Leftist critics in the GDR, on the other hand, began to view the banana as a symbol of their country's sellout to capitalism.

Like other symbols, therefore, the banana has been invested with a multitude of meanings that have changed over time. Initially a symbol of the defeat of communism and of the triumph and promise of capitalist abundance, it has come to represent the disillusionments and failed aspirations of re-unification itself. When the Leipzig Monday demonstrations briefly resumed in the spring of 1991 to protest rising unemployment and a growing sense that the East was being "colonized" by the

West, I witnessed one demonstrator carrying a long stick over his shoulder, at the end of which dangled a bunch of dark, rotten banana peels.²⁶

Another key indicator and major cause of East-West tensions were disputes over property ownership in the former GDR.²⁷ In Kella, property claims were filed by several of the families who had left the GDR in 1952, as well as by western relatives who were asserting their claims to family inheritances. As in the rest of eastern Germany, such claims not only stalled much-needed investment in the region but also often severed family relations far more drastically than the Wall ever had.

The experience of the Hauser family provides a particularly poignant illustration of a family sundered by property disputes. Emma Hauser, the youngest of six children, returned to Kella in 1952 after working in Eschwege for several years. Two brothers had been killed in World War II, and the remaining siblings opted to stay in the West. Emma recalled a discussion with her sister just before her return to Kella: "'We can't leave mother and father there [in Kella] to die alone,' I told her, and I remember what she answered as if it were yesterday: 'I don't want to throw away my whole life for the few years they have left to live.'" Emma returned the village to take care of her parents and the family property—a small house and a large garden. Gardening became her passion, she told me, and many of her happiest hours have been spent amid the cherry trees, strawberry plants, and rosebushes in the family garden plot, a five-minute walk from her home.

A year after the Wall fell, at Emma's sixtieth birthday party, two of her three surviving siblings informed her that they intended to keep their portion of the garden rather than accept the monetary compensation she had offered them earlier. Her oldest brother held to his initial promise to forgo the inheritance. A half-brother, to whom she had offered her portion of the garden in exchange for the family house that would have been his inheritance had he remained in Kella, also demanded his share. Together, her siblings' claims threatened to take away all but her oldest brother's portion of the garden.

As tensions mounted during the ensuing months, Emma's siblings began to remind her of the debts she had incurred over the years through their gifts of coveted Westpakete. She, in turn, reminded them that if she



Figure 15. Mowing "our" (Emma's) side of the garden, 1992.
(Photograph by the author)

had not returned to Kella, the property would not have been there to fight over in the first place; it probably would have been confiscated by the state after their parents died. In her own dramatic way, Emma described her feelings of hurt and resentment: "I went from freedom into bondage in order to take care of my mother and father so they wouldn't die alone. And now they [my western siblings] won't recognize that anymore. I'm afraid of the cold war that is now about to break out!" Except for contact with her oldest brother, the families stopped communicating. "We were always so close," Emma said. "These are my own siblings! And especially my brother Frank. They have such a huge house, eight rooms just for themselves. They only see the money." Emma and her husband ceased caring for her siblings' portions of the garden, allowing the grass to grow wild and the fruit to rot on the trees (Figure 15). Echoing the now common phrase, "the wall in our heads," Emma's husband told me: "The border has disappeared but the rifts have become much deeper. We were more united with the border there."²⁸

The Afterlife of the Wall

The "wall in our heads" is the product of a process through which the former political boundary that once divided East and West Germany has been replaced by the maintenance—indeed, invention—of a cultural one. This has occurred largely through practices of identifying and constructing Otherness on both sides of the former border. Taxonomies of classification, of identifying who is an Ossi and who is a Wessi, have become part of everyday life in the German borderland. While the dynamics of these taxonomies and distinctions may vary in different milieus and contexts (rural versus urban for example), practices of identifying and constructing the Other most frequently entail the reading of bodies.²⁹ In the first years after the fall of the Wall, the most visible signs of difference were identifying markers: clothing, dialect, grooming, complexion, and even odor were subject to scrutiny and evaluation. According to a discourse of Otherness in the West, Ossis could be identified by their pale faces, oily hair, poor dental work, washed-out formless jeans, generic gray shoes, and acrylic shopping bags. They smelled of body odor, cheap perfume, or, as one West German told me, "that peculiar disinfectant." Wessis, on the other hand, were recognizable by their stylish outfits, chic haircuts, Gucci shoes, tan complexions, and ecologically correct burlap shopping bags. They smelled of Estée Lauder or Polo for men.³⁰

As certain visible markers of difference have diminished through easterners' adaptation to western standards of style and dress, mannerisms and demeanor (or "mentalities," the term most frequently used in local, national, and certain social scientific discourses [Gebhardt and Kamphausen 1994, for example]), continue to be primary identifying characteristics. Ossis, western Germans say, tend to be shy and insecure and to travel or shop in groups. One villager's story about an encounter with a Wessi revealed her awareness of these stereotypes as well as her own perceptions of East-West distinctions:

Ossis just have a different mentality. My brother-in-law [who works in the West] backed into a trash can that had been placed behind his garbage truck after he'd gotten back inside. When it happened he got

out and exclaimed, "Oh my, what have I done?" The woman who had placed the can behind the truck yelled at him for running over it, and then she said, "You come from over there." My brother-in-law was surprised and answered, "How do you know that?"

"Any West German," she told him, "would have yelled back and told me how stupid I was for putting the can behind the truck in the first place."

According to a discourse of Otherness in the East, Wessis are miserly, arrogant, and self-assured. They always "think they know better," hence the common label "*Besserwessi*" (know-it-alls). One man now employed in the West explained: "They just *are* different. You can say what you want, but they can't be changed. They all act like salesmen, as if they want to sell something."

Consumer Rites

This comment about "selling something" reflects the centrality of consumption as a central organizing category and metaphor for the dynamics of East-West relations, a realm in which and through which distinctions between East and West have been experienced, expressed, negotiated, and contested.³¹ The lack of a certain cultural fluency in consumption quickly emerged as a key marker of an Ossi.³² The stereotypical insecure Ossi, for example, walks with her head down and asks the store clerk not where a certain product is but, "Do you have it?"—a practice stemming from an economy of shortages, when the issue was not where a product might be but whether the store even had it. Whereas West Germans could refer to certain products by their brand names—such as Tempo for a tissue, Tesa for adhesive tape, or Uhu for glue—East Germans would describe their function. When people described differences between East and West Germans, they frequently pointed only to consumption practices. "Ossis compare prices," I was often told; "Wessis always know what they want to buy." It was usually during shopping trips in the adjacent western town of Eschwege that people would reprimand themselves for behaving like an Ossi. "Now she probably knows I'm an Ossi," one woman whispered to me about the bakery clerk. "I didn't know what that bread was called." Standing in line at a depart-

ment store a teenager similarly scolded her mother: "Don't say that. They'll know we're Ossis!"

These women's self-reprimands were largely responses to West German discourses that condemned the materialism of East Germans as well as their ignorance of western consumption practices. As tensions between East and West mounted on both sides of the former border, insults and complaints directed at easterners frequently focused on a stereotype of materialistic Ossi ignorant of western consumption practices: "Stupid Ossi! They don't know how to shop!"; "See the packs of *Zonis* [East Germans] who are shopping again today?"; or "Look at them! They're shopping again! Don't they have anything better to do?" After the currency union in July 1990, when easterners overwhelmingly opted to buy western products with their newly acquired western marks, Ossis were projected as ignorant and foolish by western German discourses for being seduced by the fancy packaging of western goods. A common example cited was that East Germans were buying western milk while farmers in the East were forced to dump out the milk they were unable to sell.

Easterners' ignorance of western consumption practices was not only ridiculed and berated but was also exploited. As throughout the former GDR, numerous villagers were the objects, and occasionally the victims, of various mail-order gimmicks, door-to-door charlatans, and company-sponsored *Werbefahrten* (commercial shows or trips). Some villagers sent in money after receiving notice in the mail they had won a house; others purchased items from door-to-door salesmen that were never delivered; and most villagers over the age of forty (and many younger ones as well) have participated in a *Werbefahrt*.³³ These trips, lasting usually from one to three days, appealed to easterners' budgets and insecurities: for next to nothing, companies provided travel, meals, and guided sightseeing in exchange for customers' participation in a three- to four-hour-long product-promotion show that companies used to push their products. Organizers would often refuse to continue with the trip until enough items had been sold. Villagers frequently returned from these excursions with kitchen gadgets, pillows, and woolen blankets.

Just as unfamiliarity with western consumption practices was a key marker of an Ossi, then, acquiring a certain "cultural competence" (Bourdieu 1977: 186) in consumption became a central rite of initiation into the

new society. Eastern Germans had to learn not only how to navigate their way through new structures of consumer credit, domestic finance, and money management but also where and how to shop after having only experienced an economy of scarcity with standardized products and prices. If, as Appadurai has suggested, we view consumption as the "principal work of late industrial society," Ossis, it could be said, had a great deal of work to do (1993: 30; emphasis in the original).

Through personal experience, collective negotiation, and even more formal instruction, they soon became well versed in product names, prices, advertising strategies, and fashion messages. Social gatherings were often dominated by conversations and debates about product choices, quality, and prices. Comparison shopping became an acquired skill and recreational activity. Even the new grade-school textbooks, read by children and parents alike, contained lessons on the aims and functions of advertising. Advertising, one textbook teaches, "serves to provide information; attempts to move us to buy something or to awaken interests in us; serves the buyer and the seller as well as the producer."³⁴ "Advertisements lie," a ten-year old child told me, "we've now learned that."

A product-promotion show in Kella eighteen months after the Wende particularly captures these dynamics of East-West relations as well as the centrality of consumption as an organizing principle, initiation rite, and metaphor for the experience and expression of East-West distinctions. Invitations to this gathering were distributed to every village household: "Your personal invitation," they read, "to our informative lecture on the topic of health and vitality. . . . Each participant will receive a hearty meal, a drink of choice, and a gift worth 40 marks." Genuine curiosity as well as the enticement of free food and gifts drew more than 150 villagers to the community hall where the "lecture" was given.

The evening began with an introduction by the speaker, a well-dressed yet sickly looking woman in her midforties with smokers' teeth, bleached-blond hair, and prematurely aged, yellowish skin (apparently the result of years of tanning coupled with a heavy smoking habit). She presented herself as a nutritionist with a practice in Bavaria and explained that the firm she worked for manufactured health products. After the audience had received its promised (although meager) meal, she

informed us that a drawing would be held at the end of her presentation for a free trip to Spain. Murmurs and mumblings of approval filled the room as she explained: "We want *you* to be able to see Spain, too." Her tone was both paternalistic and patronizing: "we," the Wessis, want to provide "you," the poor Ossis, with opportunities only we have been able to afford. As it turned out, the trip was not entirely free (only transportation by bus was provided), but the suspense of the drawing held people there for the entire three hours of her presentation.

She then began her "lecture" on health and nutrition. According to a "renowned" nutritional society, she explained, one would have to drink more than thirteen liters of milk to receive the necessary daily allowances of calcium, eat two kilos of beef for the requisite amounts of iron, and consume a jar of honey a day to build up one's immune system through bee pollen. "Our health and our bodies are also forms of capital," she informed her listeners. "In fact, they may be the only form of capital we possess. We need to invest in them, like money in the bank." To eliminate the need for such huge quantities of food, she was offering a course of treatment of tablets, powders, and vitamins that would clear arteries and reduce cholesterol within thirty days. Although the "treatment" usually sold for 964 marks, she announced, the first ten buyers would receive it at half price. For those villagers who were unemployed or retired, the full price of the "treatment" nearly equaled a month's income.

Throughout the evening, this saleswoman drew on a variety of strategies to promote her products. Above all, she presented herself as an educator, invested with authority as a nutritionist and as a westerner. She was there to teach not only about nutrition and health but also about the rules and values of the new society. "Invest in yourself," she urged the audience, invoking the languages of production and consumption while privileging the values of western individualism, "You always have money enough for the grandchildren, but now it's time to do something for yourself." Her frequent references to the body as capital were another aspect of her presentation's "educational" function.

Like many marketing strategies, her pitch also played on the fears and insecurities of the audience while pretending to identify with and understand its situation. When people did not respond to her offer at first, she drew on stereotypes and images of materialistic and spendthrift

Ossis: "There's always money for renovating the house, or for buying a western car," she reproached them. After this play on people's guilt, she managed to sell several more "treatments." She similarly invoked a theme of "lost trust," referring to the mounting tensions and suspicions between East and West Germans (ironically through people and practices like her). "We want to restore trust," she said, holding up a West German advertisement in an eastern newspaper that looked like a news report. "That is sheer deception. Today I want to restore trust. You don't even have to pay me until the end of my presentation." Many participants nodded in approval, and several more "treatments" were sold. "I want to help you, and I will be back," she promised/threatened, "because I am firmly convinced by these products."

In the end, this saleswoman was able to sell ten "treatments," as well as numerous other products ranging from rugs to pillows to garlic pills. While several villagers expressed skepticism at her claims, and a few were outraged by people's gullibility, most enjoyed the presentation. Before leaving, some even thanked her personally for such a nice evening.

At the time, the presentation was like a collective initiation ritual: its western German sponsors hoped to profit from "educating" their eastern neighbors about health, nutrition, and consumption. By linking their products' purported benefits to the rules, values, and the spirit of capitalism, they were also selling access to, or entry into, the new society. The evening was in many ways a revelatory incident that highlighted several aspects and dynamics of East-West relations: the Besserwessi lecturing those she portrayed to be poor, ignorant Ossid; the references to easterners' materialism and spendthrift consumption; and the allusion to "lost trust" between East and West as a selling tactic.

Over time, however, the presentation came to be one of many similar initiation rites into consumer society. The meaning of the evening changed as residents became increasingly familiar with (and wary of) certain sales strategies. It became one of many stories of encounters with Wessis; when told and retold, such stories became part of a shared knowledge and common experience, a new genre of border stories.

Many border stories have since acquired the status of legends.³⁵ One story, also focusing on consumption practices, concerns a woman driving a Trabi who was forced off the road by a BMW. The western driver

stopped, walked over to her, and reportedly yelled: "Shitty Zoni! Are you going shopping again? What are you going to buy today?" Although told to me by a villager as fact ("this happened to a friend of my sister-in-law"), it appeared in different versions and in different contexts all along the former border.

Just because the event may not have happened, however, does not mean there is no truth to the story. Stories are expressions and interpretations of lived experience, not necessarily depictions of actual reality. The telling and retelling of stories, including legends, may identify sentiments and describe experience.³⁶ Once such stories are told—in media representations, at village social gatherings, or both—they become part of a shared knowledge; they may be transformed into cultural narratives that are internalized and reproduced as individual lived experience. The stories of encounters with the Other are also part of an ongoing construction of East-West distinctions.

This new genre of border stories not only is another aspect of boundary maintenance, but also reflects how the construction of Otherness on both sides of the former border entails a complex and dynamic interplay between cultural representations and lived experience, between real and invented distinctions.

Borderland Identities

The construction of Otherness in both East and West has thus resulted in the reformulation of images and categories of the Other as well as in the creation of new forms of identity. On the one hand, there is a *Nachholungsbedarf*, a need to "catch up" and "blend in" with the Wessis. In this endeavor, villagers have discarded their East German clothes, changed their hairstyles, and undertaken extensive home improvement as well as community renovation projects. When possible, in the first years after the Wende men registered their new western automobile at a West German friend's or relative's address in order to receive the coveted West German license plate, thus making them unidentifiable as Ossid when driving. "People want to blend in," one man explained; "they don't want to be identified as being East German."

Even though they may strive to imitate the West, however, people in

Kella also resist it. This paradox is not inconsistent; it reflects the complex and contradictory aspects of identity in the borderland. Rather than accepting passively the dominance of the West—until recently a prevalent image of East Germans in both eastern and western German discourses—many people have challenged it, both individually and collectively, in overt as well as very subtle ways. These challenges initially involved a simple questioning of western hegemony: “I used to believe everything in the West was golden,” one woman in her twenties told me. “If a westerner pointed to something that was red and told me it was blue, I would have nodded and said, ‘Yes, yes, you’re right. That is blue.’ Today of course I wouldn’t do that anymore.” Other contestations may entail a more explicit rejection of things West German: rather than responding, for example, with silence or tears to West German projections of inferiority, laziness, or incompetence, as many did in the early stages of East-West tensions, people have challenged or even played with western images and stereotypes of Osis. In one instance, a woman from Kella stopped her Trabi at a stoplight, where a few men exchanged jokes and comments about the automobile. On overhearing their remarks, she rolled down her window and said loudly to her daughter so that the men could hear, “Look, Sabine! They say that everything in the West is better. And it’s right. Even the dumb people are dumber!”

Over time, villagers began proudly referring to themselves as “Osis” or “Zonis.” During Heimatverein excursions, for example, club members frequently asserted that they would “rather travel with Zonis.” The period of socialist rule came to be called “in our times.” In these constructions and assertions of new forms of identity as eastern Germans in opposition to West German discourses, the reappropriation of these derogatory labels has invested them with new meanings. As Sampson has noted, “Unification wiped out East Germany, but created an East German consciousness” (1991: 19).

An emerging consciousness and counteridentity has been constructed, expressed, and asserted in a variety of ways. Village women resumed wearing their East German *Kittel* (smocks) after nearly two years of relegating them to the back of their closets because they were not considered “modern” in the West. In another instance, a family chose to drive their Trabi instead of their western Opel to a dinner with West Ger-



Figure 16. With amusement and rediscovered affection for the Trabi, villagers help restart one. (Photograph by Anne Baldwin)

man relatives, thus consciously highlighting, indeed magnifying, the distinctions between them (Figure 16). “We took the Trabi,” they proudly told me, “and parked it next to their 68,000 mark Mercedes!” Similarly, a group of men decided to drink East German beer and commented on this after a year of its being nearly taboo to serve it socially; women resumed buying the eastern German laundry detergent, Spee.

In the last few years, such subtle tactics of symbolic resistance have become widespread cultural practices throughout eastern Germany (see also Merkel 1994). Often called the “renaissance of a GDR *Heimatgefühl* [feeling of belonging or GDR identity],” these practices are part of a discourse of nostalgia and mourning—a “hazy beautification of the past”—that has contested a general devaluation of the East German past by dominant West German legal and discursive practices (Huysen 1995: 47). A disco in East Berlin, for example, seeks to reconstruct GDR times with East German drinks, music, and the old cover charge; a cinema or regional television station shows old GDR films that are watched by more

people now than they were during the socialist period; a self-described "nostalgia cafe" called "The Wallflower" is decorated with artifacts from the socialist period and serves "traditional" GDR fare; a bar in Leipzig called "Trabi-Inn" serves drinks named "FDJtler" on tabletops made of old Trabants; flea markets are littered with socialist paraphernalia for people who have begun collecting objects of the vanished state; and several supermarkets specialize in or at least carry East German products, including one in eastern Berlin whose name seems to reflect a now common sentiment, typical of "nostalgia's stubborn implications of loss and desire" (Ivy 1995: 56): "Back to the Future."³⁷

In this business of "Ostalgia" (*Ostalgie*), East German products have taken on new symbolic meaning when used the second time around. These recuperations are both gestures of defiance toward and an ironic play with images and stereotypes of Osis. And they entail the manipulation of culturally provided forms of resistance within the context of a market economy: consumer choice. Contrary to one of Kella's initial lessons in western consumption, then, Osis investing in themselves or their "bodies as capital" has entailed not the consumption of pills, powders, and vitamins but the acquisition of cultural capital in knowing how to consume.

However, now stripped from their original historical context of an economy of scarcity or an oppressive regime, these products also recall an East Germany that never existed. Thus while there may be nothing new in the strategic use of consumption as oppositional practice,³⁸ what is unique in this context is the way in which memory shapes, and is being shaped by, the consumption and reappropriation of things. These products have, in a sense, become mnemonics, signifiers of a period of time that differentiates Osis. They also illustrate not only the way in which memory is an interactive, malleable, and highly contested phenomenon but also the process through which things become informed with a remembering—and forgetting—capacity. There is not merely a tension but a dynamic interplay between nostalgia and memory here, and one of the key links is consumption.

This rememorization of trivialities is also part of a process through which consumption practices and the meaning of things have con-

tributed to the creation and reification of a temporal and spatial boundary. "Ostalgic" and similar practices are not only part of a dynamic of boundary maintenance and invention between East and West; they have also helped create a division between before and after "the Fall." Thus the items purchased with welcome money connect personal biographies to a nationally (indeed, internationally) shared historical moment (the fall of the Wall). Yet they are also what Susan Stewart has called "souvenirs of individual experience" in connection to a rite of passage (Stewart 1993). The inexpensive cassette recorders that broke within months of their purchase or the gold jewelry that turned one's skin green are, in a sense, material signs of many easterners' first lesson in western consumption. They have come not only to represent easterners' transformation into more knowledgeable consumers but also to symbolize the loss of an illusion of the "Golden West." And the loss of this illusion has been one of the most formative and disorienting aspects of re-unification.

In a 1993 magazine article identifying the emergence of such oppositional practices throughout the former GDR, the former East German writer Monika Maron is quoted as ridiculing the notion that anyone who buys "Bautzener mustard or Thüringer wurst is a resistance fighter" ("Wehre Dich Täglich" 1993). While the issue of whether and to what extent such consumption practices may constitute political resistance is an important one, such practices are, I would suggest, both reflective and constitutive of important identity transformations and negotiations in a period of intense social discord.

The annual Fasching celebrations in Kella provide further illustration of these processes. The traditional humorous skits, speeches, and songs at Fasching festivities have served as an interesting barometer of East-West relations since the fall of the Wall as well as a forum for the construction and expression of new forms of identity. In the first two years after the fall of the Wall, Fasching performances catered to the western German visitors who attended the village celebration. Rather than containing endless references to people and events in the village, as they had in the past, the performances consisted of generic jokes (usually copied from joke books) in order to have a broader appeal. "The westerners wouldn't be able to follow the show if we talked about things from the



Figure 17. Poking fun at the broken promises of re-unification in a carnival song, 1992. (Photograph by the author)

village like we used to," one participant explained. Furthermore, in the 1990 and 1991 skits and speeches, there were no references to the events, effects, or tensions of re-unification.

In 1992, however, there was a noticeable turnaround. Although there were still fewer references to village affairs, several speeches returned to the often brutal teasing of fellow villagers that required detailed local knowledge in order to be understood. Performances, consisting largely of original material and delivered with an assertive self-confidence that had been absent the previous year, offered commentaries on current events and politics ranging from the rising costs of living to the Stasi files. One speaker made fun of the villagers who had purchased the health-products "treatment course" for 500 marks; another pointed out how "over there [in the West] an Ossi has no rights." In one song, written to the tune of the popular German game-show theme "Das ganze Leben ist ein Quiz" (All of Life Is a Quiz), a group lamented the broken promises of re-unification (Figure 17). After describing the delay in the installa-

tion of telephones in Kella and the mysteries of the Stasi files, the song continued:

The Treuhand's poker game is especially bad.
 The Wessis make a killing, while we end up being had.
 Only between us should our property be split
 Because we're the only ones who have a right to it.
 [Refrain]:
 All of life is a quiz
 And we are only the candidates.
 All of life is a quiz
 And all we can do is postulate.
 We don't understand, but question we must:
 Have we let them make total asses of us?³⁹

Such assertions and references were by far the most popular performances of the evening (besides the much-loved Männerballett). Screams of laughter and thundering applause greeted, for example, the following joke from a "school class" skit delivered with careful precision and timing:

TEACHER: I hear your father is working in Eschwege now.
 STUDENT 1: Yes.
 TEACHER: And does he like it?
 STUDENT 1: Yes, but they always call him Udo.
 TEACHER: Udo? But his name is Franz.
 STUDENT 2: Don't you know what Udo means?
 STUDENT 1: No.
 STUDENT 2: You don't know?!
 STUDENT 1: No!
 STUDENT 2: Udo means "our dumb Ossi"!

This trend of defining, expressing, and asserting an identity as eastern Germans during Fasching performances has continued. In 1994, one song about East-West tensions reflected a recognition, even acceptance, of the

ongoing division as well as an affirmation of eastern German identities and values:

Now we see that we don't agree
with your civilized world.
Here honesty and courage still prevail,
for these are values we still hail.
But over there, where you reside,
Money's the only value by which you abide.⁴⁰

Although not intended as such by the writers, another song about a garden fence in town was widely interpreted (and applauded) by the audience as referring to putting "the" fence back up. In 1995, a participant dressed as a border guard roused the room to hearty applause with a bit of eastern "people's wisdom": "The fox is clever but stupid he'll play; the Wessi does it the other way."⁴¹

The purpose of these ethnographic vignettes is to illustrate a process of identity negotiation and construction, a process that is occurring throughout re-unified Germany but that takes on particular significance at the (former) border. For it is here, where the border was once physically inscribed on the space and indeed the bodies of its dwellers, that identities are especially fluid and distinctions are articulated, especially in such moments of social upheaval. This borderland consists of boundary-maintaining practices through which identities and distinctions are constructed and expressed. However it is also an interstitial zone, a place betwixt and between cultures. As Debra Castillo writes, "The border sets up a position for both living and thinking, one involving a sense of place as well as implicit displacement. It suggests a space that is both neatly divided and, in the crossover dreams of its inhabitants, disorientingly confused" (1995: 18).

Residents of the German borderland thus may strive to avoid being identified as Osis while asserting an identity as East Germans. They may drive to the West in their Volkswagen Golf with western plates, for example, yet decide to work in the East for less money because they'd "rather be with Osis." They may date a West German to rebel against their father who "hates Wessis," yet confidently declare, "I'll never be-

come one of *them*." They may rise to the defense of Osis yet distinguish themselves from the rest of eastern Germans, as did the following speech from Fasching in 1992: "They also say that Osis are lazy, but accusing Kellans of this would be totally crazy." In more extreme cases of interstitiality they may become "Wossis": Osis who take on exaggerated characteristics of Wessis.

Similarly, people may manipulate their liminal position empowered by newly acquired knowledge of consumption practices. In order to distinguish themselves from other Osis, for example, some residents began to shop at the more prestigious western German department stores. In a similar vein, one villager was especially proud to be the only one of four eastern Germans not to be recognized as an Ossi at a western restaurant; yet at her workplace in Eschwege, she refused to conform to the demanding dress code of her western German coworkers. "I never want to become one of them," she claimed.

As with most borderlands, this one is characterized by an uneven and asymmetrical intersection of cultures. In this site of cultural confrontation, struggles over the production of cultural meanings and contestations of social values occur in the context of such asymmetrical relations. Although borderland residents may be in-between cultures, both geographically and metaphorically, the hegemony of the West conveys a sense that they are, or should be, moving in a particular direction. As one man from Kella explained, "The West demands that the people here in the East be exactly like they are [in the West]. They presume to know everything, [as evidenced] in their way of presenting themselves and in their demand that our people [in the East] don't have anything of our own to preserve."

Contrary to certain border theories, then, residents of Kella are not "halfway beings" (Castillo 1995). Nor are they, as many popular and academic discourses would have it, passive East Germans who have accepted and internalized western projections of them as inferior.⁴² Instead, through a dynamic and subtle interplay of imitation, resistance, and *Eigen-Sinn* (one's own sense, or one's own meaning), these borderliners are creating and articulating new forms of identity and alternative notions of "Germanness."⁴³

BORDERLINING

To conclude, I turn to a series of revelatory incidents, all of which occurred at a single family gathering. Together these incidents illustrate the liminal condition of the borderland as well as the ongoing construction of porous boundaries after the collapse of impermeable ones. The occasion for the gathering was a child's first holy communion, and the assembled family members included aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents from eastern and western Germany. Throughout the day, conversations about unemployment, government subsidies for the former GDR, and the recent surge in violence against foreigners repeatedly came to an abrupt halt in order to avoid further escalation in familial tensions. "You people need to learn how to work," "You'll never figure this system out," and "A normal person can only shake his head at what goes on over here" were frequent comments of a western relative. Family members from the former GDR, on the other hand, accused West Germany of exporting xenophobia to the East ("We got that from *you*—that didn't exist here before!"), staunchly defended their work habits, and confided to me on the side how hurtful their western relatives' accusations were.

After dinner, several members of the party decided to undertake what has now become a ritualized practice in Kella: a walk along the border leading up the "Window to Kella," where, instead of peering down on the Otherness of the East, as westerners had once done, residents assess the condition and status of their village. This walking ritual reflects the incorporation of the former East-West boundary into a local identifying narrative of multiple and layered boundaries; the ritual is also a spatial practice that defines and reinscribes the boundary. Sunday walks regularly follow this path; people often point out not only the former ten-meter strip but also the former boundary stones between Prussia and Hesse (and hence between the Catholic Eichsfeld and its Protestant surroundings), along which the postwar occupied zones were demarcated. A year after the Wall fell, in fact, one resident took it on himself to repaint these stones—a literal reinscription of a multilayered boundary.

Once we had reached our destination, a recently renovated "Window to Kella" with benches and wooden railings sponsored and erected by

the Heimatverein, the group gazed down quietly and contemplatively at the village. With its spring dress of cherry blossoms accentuated by the setting sun, Kella had never looked better. "Nothing stands in the way of Kella looking like the West," one woman from Kella proudly exclaimed. "In a few years it will be as good as any western village." Another village woman agreed: "The inland area [of the former GDR, farther to the east] is supposed to be much worse."

The women's comments reflected the notion, mapped onto the social space of the borderland as well as the minds of its inhabitants, that Kella was somewhere between East and West. Although it may be in this literal borderland that its in-betweenness is most visible, the borderland may also be viewed as a metaphor for "the transition" itself. Indeed, the women's remarks suggest a sense of liminality combined with a particular trajectory, as revealed in their implicit acceptance of the hegemony of western standards as the goal toward which Kella should strive. Yet there is also an unstated recognition that these standards remain distinctly Other. From the in-betweenness of the borderline, the women acknowledged both their liminality as well as their identity as easterners.

The group's quiet observations and contemplations were interrupted just a few minutes later when a cantankerous western relative loudly and only half-jokingly asserted: "I was up here first! I was here before all of you!" There, standing directly on the former border, he was reminding members of the group which side each of them came from, and where each of them belonged. He was also implying that he had been—and still is—somehow ahead of his eastern German relatives.

This ritual of walking the border thus highlighted the dual nature of the borderland as a place where identity is both especially articulated and uniquely fluid.⁴⁴ The comments during our walk were uttered in the context of the day's conversations as well as that of mounting tensions between East and West throughout the country. The remarks were part of an ongoing process of boundary maintenance and construction as well as of a process of manipulating, and perhaps sustaining, a liminal condition.