

## Epilogue: The Tree of Unity

During re-unification celebrations on October 3, 1990, residents of Kella, visitors, and local politicians from West Germany planted an oak sapling near the village soccer field. The Tree of Unity was intended to symbolize renewal and the growing together of the two Germanies after forty years of division. A year later, the tree was dead, symbolizing for many villagers the lost hopes and expectations of re-unification itself (Figure 28). "Of course it died," one woman told me, flipping her wrist forward and shaking her head to emphasize what many perceived to be the obvious symbolic connection between the tree's death and disappointing developments since re-unification. A new tree was planted by village workers without ceremony several months later, this time surrounded by a piece of the former border fence to protect it, people said, from animals and other elements. The tree is thriving (Figure 29).

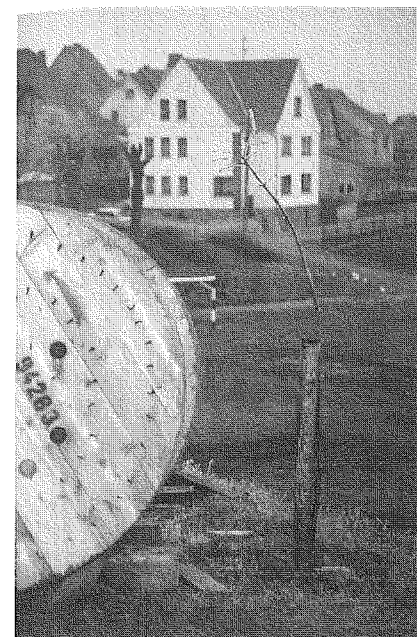


Figure 28. The original Tree of Unity, 1991. On the left is a spool of telephone cable. (Photograph by the author)

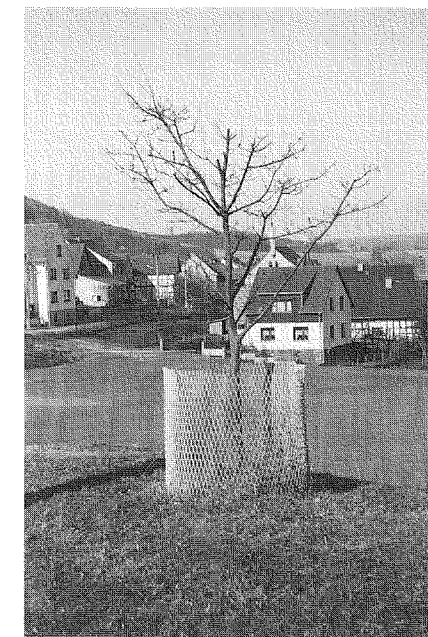


Figure 29. The replacement Tree of Unity, surrounded by a piece of the former border fence, 1996. (Photograph by the author)

Like the wooden cross at the Seventh Station, the border fencing around the Tree of Unity only later acquired symbolic value. Originally intended as a functional solution to the problem of protecting the sapling, the iron fencing was like other materials from the border that were readily available and being used throughout the village to practical ends. The tree became symbolic as it began to thrive in its new, enclosed location. Many villagers, pointing to the merely functional purpose of the fencing, failed to see an irony in this development. Others, in an "argument of images" (Fernandez 1986), related it to their experience and interpretation of recent events: "Put the fence back up and [the tree] grows," one young man chuckled. Although stated with humor, his comment invoked a series of cultural references in local and national discourses on both sides of the former border—ranging from T-shirts to

jokes to heated confrontations between East and West—that called for putting back up the Wall.

The Tree of Unity reflected not only the serendipitous and multifarious nature of symbols but also the creativity, and often humor, with which people have manipulated, negotiated, and even sustained a liminal condition during a period of turbulent change. Like many of the incidents, anecdotes, and stories I have described in this book, the Tree of Unity might be dismissed by some as trivial or inconsequential; accusations of “mereness” are often leveled at anthropology (Herzfeld 1997). What such allegations overlook, however, is that processes of social change are most intimately experienced and thus often most discernible in the minutiae of everyday life. Further, as Bourdieu and Foucault (among others) have argued, the very triviality of everyday practices is a key element of their power; it is in the routines and intimacies of daily life that cultural forms acquire their taken-for-granted (or, in Bourdieu’s terminology, “doxic”) quality.

As I have attempted to show in a variety of contexts throughout this book, the nation-state may frequently become most effectively anchored in the trivialities of daily life, for it is in everyday practices that the experience of national belonging and state power is both activated and contested. Under socialist rule, and especially in borderlands like Kella, the state permeated most realms of daily life, ranging from the penetrating presence of the border and its culture of surveillance to village social life, which was structured by factory work brigades, state mass organizations, and lengthy shopping queues. Since re-unification, the pervasive presence of the new (West) German nation-state, frequently defined and promoted in terms of a consumer market economy and economic prosperity,<sup>1</sup> has been, and continues to be, manifested and experienced in equally quotidian domains: in daily negotiations of new consumption practices; in the decline of face-to-face interaction that has resulted, in part, from the closing of state-owned factories and cooperatives; in transformations in religious practices attributed to the influx of a consumer society; in the Tupperware parties and silk-painting sessions that coincided with the loss of maternity, child-care, and employment benefits for women; and, perhaps most noticeably for residents of Kella, in the nearly complete dismantling of the former border structure.

Yet it is also in the trivialities of daily life that such anchorings are contested—subtly, often silently, and sometimes not even fully consciously:

It is the realm of partial recognition, of inchoate awareness, of ambiguous perception, and, sometimes, of creative tension: that liminal space of human experience in which people discern acts and facts but cannot or do not order them into narrative descriptions or even into articulate conceptions of the world. . . . It is from this realm, we suggest, that silent signifiers and unmarked practices may rise to the level of explicit consciousness, of ideological assertion, and become the subject of overt political and social contestation—or from which they may recede into the hegemonic, to languish there unremarked for the time being. (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 29)

Under socialism, this spectrum of contestations included GDR flags wedged between windows on state holidays, greetings disguised as housecleaning to relatives standing on the western side of the border, a blue Aral gasoline bumper sticker pasted on the inside of a kitchen cupboard, a playful yet critical performance at carnival, or regular attendance at mass. In the first years after the fall of the Wall, critiques of the new order were similarly expressed in gestures of tacit dissent as well as conscious opposition: in carnival songs and monologues, decisions to leave lucrative employment in the West for lower-paying work with other Ossis in the former GDR, the resuscitation of women’s Kittel, choosing the Trabi over a western car, and investing with symbolic meaning an iron fence around a tree.

If measured by their success in arresting the absorption of the East by the West, such practices may not be considered truly resistive. Ultimately, of course, West German political, economic, and sociocultural forms and institutions will continue to prevail. However, moments and processes of transition are not to be measured solely by their political outcomes. In the process of this transition between two German states, people have invented, and to some extent ritualized, cultural practices that both reflect and constitute profound identity negotiations and transformations. In Kella, these negotiations have frequently entailed the emergence of certain rites of passage that mark a transition: a trip to the Braunrode hill overlooking Kella, borderlining walks along the old boundary, even a first visit to McDonald’s. Like many aspects of every-



Figure 30. The village center, 1991.  
(Photograph by the author)

day life under socialist rule in Kella, these ritualistic practices have often been informed by the contextual specificity and dense materiality of the now vanished territorial border.

When I returned to Kella in 1996, the village looked, felt, smelled, and sounded more “western.” Most brown coal ovens had been replaced by oil heating, largely eliminating the distinctive odor of “GDR air.” Many Trabis were also gone, not because they were no longer desirable but because they could not pass the rigorous vehicle inspections of West Germany. Because of the widespread availability and relative inexpensiveness of formerly coveted food products like meat and eggs, gone too was the raising of livestock and poultry for domestic consumption—and



Figure 31. The village center, 1996. (Photograph by the author)

along with it, the rural sounds of pigs, chickens, and sheep as well as corresponding local rituals associated with animal slaughtering. The roads were newly paved, and the village center had been “renewed” with a small parking area, a decorative fountain, a renovated and privatized local pub, and a freshly laid cobblestone street (Figures 30 and 31). The old clips factory was being remodeled as a duplex apartment, and more houses, including four new homes, glistened with clean white (and one yellow) stucco. Kella’s face-lift was so remarkable, in fact, that in 1996 the community was awarded first prize in a statewide competition for Thuringia’s most beautiful village.

Although many of the material signs of eastern German distinctiveness are gone, fault lines remain. Etched into memory and legible in the scarred landscape that is saturated with meanings, the border lives on. It is reproduced, reinvented, and transgressed in the intimacies of daily contact: during encounters while shopping, working, driving, hiking. Indeed, during my visit in 1996, practices of constructing Otherness on both sides of the former border were still part of daily life. During shopping trips to Eschwege, or when encountering hikers in the hills sur-

rounding Kella, bodies were still being read and classified as "East" or "West." "We *are* Ossis," one villager proudly told me, "and we want to remain Ossis!"

Crossing the border thus remains an act of declaration—one which, for most residents of Kella, now belongs to the routines of daily life. When people return home from their workplaces, shopping excursions, or visits in the West, they leave the hegemonic space of a foregone conclusion, an unrealized yet inevitable trajectory of re-unification, and reenter a Heimat of an increasingly vanishing past, where the institutions, structures, and appearances of a once familiar life are rapidly receding to the realm of memory, and amnesia. This movement back and forth may prevent the solidification of identities at either end, as many border theorists would suggest, but it can also produce an acute consciousness of in-betweenness. Like the inscription of the literal border onto space and bodies during socialist rule, so too has a state of transition been incorporated into daily life. People may no longer be taking their foot off the gas pedal when approaching the site of a former border checkpoint, but they are constantly confronted with symbolically loaded choices of identification, affirmation, or contestation created by the collapse of this significant frame of reference. Many of the negotiations and ritualizations of these choices embody the liminal realm from which they have emerged: walking the former borderline, playing with a collar, constructing a cross out of barbed wire, noticing a thriving tree.

One of the many paradoxes of the borderland, then, is that ambiguity creates clarity. Indeed, perhaps this is the ultimate symbolism of the Tree of Unity: Not only does the flourishing tree ironically signify an alternative vision of "Germanness"—of eastern German particularism, consciousness, and *Eigen-Sinn*—that defiantly contests official master narratives of a united Germany, it also represents a kind of lucidity created out of the chaos and failures of transition, symbolized for many in the demise of the first little tree. In the literal and figurative borderlands of human experience, cultural forms are not always taken for granted.

In this study of one community after the fall of the Berlin Wall, I have attempted to unpack the different meanings of a borderland by examining the creation, maintenance, transformation, and invention of different

kinds of boundaries and border zones in daily life. Borders, I have argued, are zones of ambiguity and liminality as well as places of intense and articulated lucidity; in fact, these qualities are often mutually constitutive. I have aimed not only to provide here an account of the confluence of the local and the extralocal in this unique historical moment but also to portray certain processes and particulars of *negotiation*, a term that itself denotes a process of defining spaces between things as well as of drawing distinctions and commonalities—a process of creating both clarity and confusion, indicative of experience in the borderland; indeed, of much experience itself.