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'(N)Ostalgie' for the Present: Memory, Longing, and East German Things

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ABSTRACT *The last several years have witnessed the birth and boom of a nostalgia industry in the former East Germany that has entailed the recuperation, (re)production, marketing, and merchandising of GDR products as well as the 'museumification' of GDR everyday life. This paper interrogates a distinction between 'mere' nostalgia and socially sanctioned commemorative practices by tracing the social lives of East German things, including their paths, diversions, and recuperations, in the context of eastern Germany's transition to a late industrial society. I seek to elucidate not only the social, political, and economic conditions that have produced the recent explosion of 'Ostalgie' (nostalgia for the East) in the former GDR, but an interplay between hegemonic and oppositional memories as well. In framing resistance to western German hegemony in terms of product choices and mass merchandising, I argue, practices and products of 'Ostalgie' both contest and affirm the new order.*

KEYWORDS *Memory, nostalgia, consumption, resistance, 'museumification', East Germany*

n the weekend of October 3, 1997, a national holiday in honor of the re-unification¹ of Germany in 1990, many eastern Germans gathered throughout the former GDR in various forms of counter-commemorations. While politicians in the West claimed and applauded progress toward unity, 'GDR weekends' at local pubs in the East served East German beer at GDR prices to guests dressed in socialist youth group (*FDJ*) outfits or people's militia (*Kampfgruppe*) uniforms. Even more extreme were the wilder and self-parodying 'Ossi' partys,² 'Ostivals,' and 'Ossi discos'³ (held not only on this holiday) featuring East German rock music, party propaganda songs (frequently remixed to a techno beat), and a double of the former Communist Party leader Erich Honecker complete with drab gray suit and stiff wave of the hand. Although most eastern Germans were more likely to

stay at home and, like their neighbors in the West, joke – or lament – that there was little to celebrate on this 7th anniversary of German re-unification, such gatherings did represent one end of a spectrum of growing practices in the former GDR commonly referred to as *Ostalgie* ('Ostalgia', or 'nostalgia for the east').³ Indeed, the last several years have witnessed the birth and boom of a nostalgia industry in the former East Germany that has entailed the revival, reproduction, and commercialization of GDR products as well as the 'museumification' of GDR everyday life.

Embarrassing, irritating, puzzling, or laughable to many western and eastern Germans alike, such practices are readily dismissed in popular, political, and academic discourses as 'mere' nostalgia – as the questionable products of 'GDR romantics,' former Communist Party loyalists, now represented by the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), and clever entrepreneurs. In a similar vein, *Ostalgie* is consistently and pointedly distinguished from more 'historical' (i.e., 'authentic') practices of collecting, displaying, or cataloguing 'GDR everyday life' in public and private commemorative contexts. As potentially disruptive practices that emanate from the margins to challenge certain nation-building agendas of the new Germany, *Ostalgie* is at the center of what Michael Herzfeld has called a 'politics of mereness' (Herzfeld 1997a).

One of my principal aims in this paper is to interrogate the politics of this distinction between 'mere' nostalgia and socially sanctioned commemorative practices by tracing the social lives of East German things, including their paths, diversions, and recuperations. Following Appadurai's insight that 'from a *theoretical* point of view human actors encode things with significance, [while] from a *methodological* point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their social context' (Appadurai 1986:5; emphasis in original), I seek to elucidate not only the social conditions that have produced the recent explosion of *Ostalgie* in the former GDR, but an interplay between hegemonic and oppositional memories as well.⁴ In this sense, I attempt to offer a more nuanced notion of the complexities, ambiguities, and contradictions of resistance practices more generally (Ortner 1995). *Ostalgie*, I suggest, both contests and affirms a new order.

Production and Collapse

In order to examine the decontextualization of East German objects, I begin with few points on the contexts from which they became dislodged. In the heavily industrialized society that was East Germany, the pursuit of prosperity was intricately connected to an ideology of production. Indeed, one of

the definitive features of socialist citizenship was production, a worker's identity that was inculcated through forty years of state ideology, factory production rituals, and physical, industrial labor. The factory brigade, for example, was also an important social unit; factory-sponsored fieldtrips often provided the only opportunities for travel away from home; and socialist production rituals aimed to engender loyalty to the state as well as an identification with the products of production. Many East German factories housed a daycare center, a general store, and even a doctor's office on factory grounds. Such policies and practices were not only a way of making it easier for women to enter the workforce, they were also part of a process through which the state attempted to supplant certain roles and functions of the private sphere – child rearing, family meals, and so forth – with the public sphere of the socialist workplace. In the GDR, the workplace was thus not only the center of everyday sociality, it was also a symbolic space of community and national belonging.

In the logic of centralized planning, socialism's locus of competition made success dependent upon socialist firms' ability to bargain for and procure materials rather than their ability to sell them. Although East Germany witnessed its own 'economic miracle' of sorts in the 1960s, in which product design and marketing were important features (see NGBK 1996), most everyday East German products remained largely unchanged in the last decades of the GDR. For many people on both sides of the inter-German border, this lack of product innovation and consumer choice, more than any political difference, constituted the principal distinction between East and West. As one woman told me: 'We saw on western TV that every year they [West Germans] had a new model of car, while our *Trabi* remained the same.' Or, as another young man joked: 'We always used to say that Marxism could have worked if it hadn't been for cars.'

Such sentiments were echoed and amplified in the discourses of capitalist 'triumphalism' following the fall of the Berlin Wall. The drab and clumsy East German products that embodied socialism's failure to 'deliver the goods' were quickly collected as 'camp'⁵ by West Germans as they were resoundingly rejected by the easterners who had made them. After the currency union in July of 1990, when easterners overwhelmingly opted to buy western products with their newly acquired Deutschmarks, *Ossis* were projected as ignorant and foolish by West German discourses for being seduced by the fancy packaging of western goods. Although there was a certain element of truth in the images of East Germans on a frenetic, collective shopping spree following the conversion of their eastern marks into western currency,⁶ eastern

products had also disappeared, nearly overnight, from the store shelves as West German distributors assumed control of the East German market. 'All of the sudden the products from the East vanished,' one woman told me, 'it wasn't just that we all only wanted to have the nice western products. Rather there were no eastern products to buy.'

The Politics of Value

In the immediate aftermath of socialism's collapse, many everyday East German products entered a new phase of their 'careers' (Appadurai 1986). Relegated to storage warehouses, the depths of domestic closets, and even waste dumps,⁷ GDR goods often came to stand for the meaning of the transition itself. More than any other product, the East German Trabant (*Trabi*) quickly became a key symbol not only of the GDR, but of socialist inefficiency, backwardness, and inferiority. A small, boxy car made of fiberglass and pressed cotton, the Trabi with its two-stroke engine contrasted sharply with the fast West German Mercedes, Porsches, and BMWs. Indeed, as Robert Darnton observed, this contrast in cars couldn't help but embody 'the two Germanys: one super-modern, hard-driving, serious, and fast; the other archaic, inefficient, absurd, and slow, but with a lot of heart' (Darnton 1991:155). In the GDR, East Germans often waited 15 years and paid the equivalent of two annual salaries to obtain one. With the fall of the Wall, the Trabi was not only rendered valueless in monetary terms, but was at first affectionately, and then as relations between East and West Germans grew increasingly hostile, antagonistically ridiculed in West German jokes as well as in everyday interactions.⁸

Museum displays of GDR products similarly affirmed and constructed an image of socialist backwardness as reflected in and constituted by its quaint and outdated products. As one catalog from a museum exhibit in Frankfurt shortly after the fall of the Wall read:

East Germany has unwittingly preserved fossils of articles which, twenty to thirty years ago, were near and dear to us ... [It is] high time then to embark upon a lightning archeological excursion into the world of consumer goods before this distinctive quality is submerged beneath the tide of Western goods... (Bertsch 1990:7).

These devaluations of East German things have taken place in the context of a more general and often systematic devaluing of the GDR past since German re-unification. Such practices have included the selling of East German factories to western companies, occasionally for next to nothing; the discredit-

ing of the GDR educational system, particularly the *Abwicklung*⁹ (restructuring) of the universities; the renaming of schools, streets, and other public buildings; the toppling of socialist memorials and monuments; the trial of Berlin border guards that for many eastern Germans represented a sort of victors' justice; debates over what to do with and about East Germany's *Stasi* (state security police) heritage that often compared the GDR to the Third Reich; and to return to the Trabi again, discourses that ridiculed the backwardness of East Germany while ignoring the social and historical contexts that may have produced it. Although generated and experienced differently in form and content (*Abwicklung* was viewed as an affront and degradation by eastern German academics, for example, whereas the toppling of socialist monuments and memorials was divisive and often done by GDR anti-communists),



From the jokebooks
to 'cult-automobile':
A refurbished eastern
German Trabant (Trabi).
Photo by author.

such practices have generally been grouped together in an eastern German discourse of oppositional solidarity against western hegemony. As the eastern German psychotherapist Hans Joachim Maaz remarked: 'People here saved for half a lifetime for a spluttering Trabant. Then along comes the smooth Mercedes society and makes our whole existence, our dreams and our identity, laughable' (in McElvoy 1992:219).

As a challenge to this undermining of some of the very foundations of easterners' identity and personhood, shortly after the fall of the Wall many eastern Germans began asserting an emerging consciousness and identification as eastern Germans, or *Ossis*. During the course of my fieldwork in an East German border village between 1990 and 1992, for example, women pulled their East German *Kittel* (smocks), an important symbol of working women in the GDR, out of the back of their closets after not having worn them for nearly two years because they were not considered 'modern' in the West; a family chose to drive the Trabi instead of their western Opel to a dinner with West German relatives, thus consciously highlighting, indeed magnifying, the distinctions between them: 'We took the Trabi,' they proudly told me, 'and parked it next to their 68,000 DM Mercedes.' Similarly, a group of men chose to drink East German beer after it had been nearly taboo to serve it socially; women resumed buying the eastern German laundry detergent *Spee*; teenagers sought out the East German *Vita Cola*. As my friend Anna explained, when I asked her about her resuscitated smock: 'The wearing of smocks subsided in the first years after the fall of the Wall, but somewhere it's a part of us.'

Back to the Future

By the mid 1990s, however, such tactics of symbolic resistance had become widespread, and to some extent, routinized cultural practices throughout eastern Germany. Often referred to as a 'GDR revival' or the 'renaissance of a GDR *Heimatgefühl*,' these practices include, for example, a disco in East Berlin that seeks to reconstruct GDR times with East German drinks, music, and the old cover charge; a local cinema that shows old GDR films; a self-described 'nostalgia café' called 'The Wallflower' (*Mauerblümchen*) that is decorated with artifacts from the socialist period and serves 'traditional' GDR fare; and several supermarkets that specialize in East German products, including one whose name seems to reflect a now common sentiment: 'Back to the Future.'

Ostalgie has also become an increasingly profitable industry. One product of and catalyst for the current *Ostalgie* boom is a card game, designed by two university students in East Berlin, consisting of 46 different GDR food brand labels – all but three of which are now obsolete. Entitled *Kost the Ost* ('Taste the East'), a clever retort to the 'Test the West' slogan of *West* cigarettes that proliferated on billboards throughout East Germany following the *Wende*,¹⁰ over 10,000 games were sold during its first week on the market in late 1996.

Since then, numerous other *Ostalgie* products have made their way into eastern German stores. One board game, *Überholen ohne Einzuholen* ('outdistance without catching up,' a well-known SED party slogan promising to exceed West German prosperity on East German terms), has as its goal Wandlitz, the elite compound of party leaders in the GDR; players must collect a Trabi, a phone, and party membership along the way. *Ferner Osten* ('Far East'), is another board game in which teams of 'collectives' are asked to answer trivia questions about details of daily life under socialist rule, ranging from the product names of East German non-alcoholic drinks to the texts of party songs to the price of a chocolate bar in the GDR. Similarly, a memory/matching game whose packaging recalls the East German scouring powder, *ATA*, includes pairs of GDR products and icons. Postcards of Trabis or GDR products, collections of GDR jokes, replicas of SED party merit certificates, and numerous books about GDR products, including a 'Small Encyclopedia of Eastern Products,' fill store windows in many eastern German cities. During my fieldwork in the summer of 1998, sales clerks in Leipzig consistently reported rapid sales of these items.

In this business of *Ostalgie*, East German products have taken on new meaning when used the second time around. Now stripped of their original context of an economy of scarcity or an oppressive regime, these products largely recall an East Germany that never existed. They thus illustrate not only the way in which memory is an interactive, malleable, and highly contested phenomenon, but also the processes through which things become informed with a remembering – and forgetting – capacity.

These recuperations also reveal a certain mourning for production. However counterproductive socialist production rituals may have been in generating workers' loyalty to the state (Burawoy & Lukács 1992; Verdery 1996), they appear to have inculcated, to some extent at least, an identification with production.¹¹ During the time of my fieldwork in an East German border village, people often recalled with pride, for example, the products of their labor in the local toy factory. Similarly, during a village parade in honor of German re-unification in October 1990, women replicated the familiar GDR placard that once hung on the walls of their workplace: 'My hand for my product.' More recently, a former steel-girder construction worker in Leipzig explained to me: 'I can't tell you how painful it was for me to see the products of my labor simply dismissed after the *Wende*.'

In a society where productive labor was a key aspect of state ideology and where the workplace was a central site for social life, the high incidence of



A billboard advertisement for the revitalized eastern German 'Vita-Cola' in front of dilapidated remains of GDR industry. Photo by author.

unemployment throughout eastern Germany has profoundly undermined many peoples' sense of self and identity. 'Unemployment,' explained one woman from Leipzig, 'is for our understanding the worst thing there is. We were all raised to be socialists, and we were taught that work is what separates humans from animals. That is what we learned. Suddenly to be without work is unthinkable for us.' The resurgence of eastern German products must thus be viewed within the larger context of the shift in the balance between production and consumption in the former GDR that has occurred through rapid de-industrialization¹² – a process that took decades in most advanced industrial societies that eastern Germany has undergone in just a few years (Geyer 1994). Consuming products of *Ostalgie* is not merely an assertion of identity as eastern Germans, then, it also recalls an identity as producers that has been lost in this transition.

An effort to refashion an identification with production and to capitalize on an increasingly defiant eastern German identity is also reflected in a dif-

ferent trajectory of East German things: the production and marketing of former GDR products in new packaging and contexts. Many supermarkets throughout eastern Germany will now note next to a particular product if it has been produced in the 'Five New Federal States.' *Konsum Leipzig*, a regional supermarket chain in Leipzig and one of the few surviving East German enterprises in a landscape dominated by western discount stores, has based much of its business, reputation, and advertising on this very premise. 'We are sticking together and shop in *Konsum*' reads one of its marketing slogans; 'We're from *here*' declares another in an advertising supplement whose heading includes the five coats of arms of the New Federal States; and most of its store-fronts proudly proclaim, *Konsum Leipzig: One of Us*.¹ Still functioning as a cooperative, *Konsum* stores specialize in products produced in the former GDR, often by re-privatized firms, including many 'trusted old brand-names.'

One aim of the company's advertising efforts is to educate citizens about the workings of a market economy and the relationship between employment and consumer choices. 'Our recommendation: Purchase products that are produced here [former GDR],' says one advertisement. 'In this way you strengthen our economy and create jobs.' Another objective, however, is to tap into widespread resentments toward large western retail chains and discount stores that quickly entered the eastern German market after the currency union in 1990, driving many local shops out of business. 'Give priority to the stores of your *Konsum Leipzig*. After all, enough has been 'liquidated' [*abgewickelt*]' states one promotional pamphlet, whose choice of the term *abwickeln* alludes to the general restructuring and dismantling of GDR institutions after the collapse of socialism. Similarly, a *Konsum* employee is quoted in another brochure: 'It's too bad that so much has been liquidated [*abgewickelt*] and only a few businesses here have survived. Among those survivors is our *Konsum Leipzig*, which has held its own against the powerful West German retail chains. *Konsum* is for us a part of our identity that has been preserved. We are proud of this.'

Such efforts to specialize in and market former GDR products have been largely successful. The chairman of the board of directors of *Konsum* explained that people buy such products

out of disappointment, out of pride, out of definition and demarcation [from western Germany], and finally, but very important, out of remembrance. These [eastern] products were on the market, then they were gone, and suddenly they are back again. People have really fallen for them, and there are a lot of success stories now for the companies producing them.

When given a choice, I was routinely told, people choose to buy eastern products. As one woman in Leipzig explained:

After the Wall fell we all threw ourselves at the western things... In the first months after the Wall I gained 25 pounds! I had to try out every chocolate bar – Toblerone, Rittersport. And the nice large rolls! But then we saw that they were only made out of air and we wanted our *Ossi* rolls back. Our *Spee* laundry detergent, our mustard, our spices. We all search until we find these things. Eastern products are back.

In addition to the re-invention, re-production, and mass merchandising of East German products, this 'GDR revival' has also included the collecting, cataloging and 'museumification' of 'GDR everyday life.' Voluntary associations dedicated to the 'documentation and preservation of everyday life,' for example, allocate responsibilities among members for collecting everything from East German packaging materials to work brigade medals. Informal museums, galleries, and displays in community centers or people's homes similarly contain various objects of the vanished state (see especially Ten Dyke n.d.). Museum exhibits of 'GDR culture' in eastern Germany,¹³ including a recent show in Erfurt entitled *Deutsche Demokratische Restbestände* (German Democratic Remains), strive to preserve, instruct, and dignify. One exhibition, for example, aims explicitly to counter the dominant images of the GDR as an economy of scarcity; another categorically contrasts its collection of 'historical' objects from widespread nostalgia for an 'allegedly better past.' The widespread popularity of these exhibits – a Berlin exhibit on GDR consumer culture and product design was described in one newspaper account as having unleashed a 'cult event' – reflects a dynamic interplay between 'official' and 'unofficial' forms of remembering, linked by nostalgia.

Nostalgia as a Weapon¹⁴

Such practices of recuperation – in the museums, discos, and board games – entail what Marilyn Ivy has called 'the vanishing': that which '(dis)embodies in its gerund form the movement of something passing away, gone but not quite, suspended between presence and absence' (Ivy 1995:20). As with most forms of nostalgia, recovery of a lost past is not the object or objective of desire, as Susan Stewart has noted in theorizing nostalgic desire more generally:

Hostile to history and its invisible origins, and yet longing for an impossibly pure context of lived experience at a place of origin, nostalgia wears a distinctly utopian face, a face that turns toward a future-past, a past which has only ideological reality ... nostalgia is the desire for desire (Stewart 1993:23).

As elsewhere, nostalgia here is, as Kathleen Stewart has argued, 'a cultural practice, not a given content... In positing a 'once was' in relation to a 'now', it creates a frame for meaning, a means of dramatizing aspects of an increasingly fluid and unnamed social life' (Stewart 1988:227). In this sense, nostalgia is about the production of a present rather than the reproduction of a past. Although certainly a form of 'structural nostalgia' (Herzfeld 1997a),¹⁵ these recuperations are also culturally specific practices that are connected to social, political, and economic processes of late capitalism more generally (cf. Ivy 1995; Stewart 1993; Stewart 1988) and to post-socialist eastern Germany more specifically.¹⁶ In the context of profound displacement following re-unification, reflected in the popular saying that we have 'emigrated without leaving [home],' *Ostalgie* can be an attempt to reclaim a kind of *Heimat* (home or homeland), albeit a romanticized and hazily glorified one (Huyssen 1995).

In the asymmetrical context of remembering in the new Germany, 'Ostalgic' practices reflect and constitute the construction and expression of a kind of counter-memory. These resuscitated products have, in a sense, become mnemonics, sometimes explicitly so, as one exhibit catalog suggested: 'Each object [in the exhibit] carries with it its own meaning, is connected to everyday experiences, and can serve as an occasion for remembering.' Similarly, the designers of the *Kost the Ost* card game, whose rules require fairly extensive and detailed knowledge of GDR everyday life, described their product as a kind of mnemonic device (*Erinnerungsstifter*). Indeed, many of these *Ostalgie* products seem to fulfill this purpose. After a small group of friends finished playing the *Überholen ohne Einzuholen* board game, for example, their two hosts, Andrea and Volker, brought out of storage boxes of GDR identity cards, *Junge Pioniere* and *FDJ* membership books,¹⁷ and other personal artifacts from the vanished state. The group spent another hour poring over these items together, recalling the various state-sponsored activities and groups they had participated in, poking fun at Andrea for dutifully pasting the tiny monthly membership stamps into her membership books, and reminiscing about the shortages of goods and materials that had dominated much of daily life in the GDR. In perusing the passport-size photos contained in identity cards and nearly every membership book, people also commented on how Volker and Andrea had changed, and aged, over the years. In a similar instance, I witnessed people digging old GDR goods – often slated for disposal – out of the backs of cupboards and closets after seeing them featured in some of the recent catalogs, photo collections, or 'encyclopedias' of eastern products. 'These

plastic ice cream bowls were wedding presents,' one man recalled, 'and we were going to toss them. But after seeing them in this book, we decided to keep them after all.' The products of *Ostalgie*, then, offer a means of remembering the GDR as well as of connecting personal biographies to the passing of time and a state.

In contrast to the kind of 'imperialist nostalgia' (defined by Rosaldo [1989] as a nostalgia for that which one has destroyed) reflected in the earlier Frankfurt exhibit, these recent commemorative and instructional efforts represent an attempt to recuperate, validate, and anchor a collective memory of a shared past. 'It's not only the music,' said one customer at an 'Ost-disco', 'it's the shared memory. When the music is playing, people look at each other and just know, without having to say anything.'¹⁸ The popular board and card games are viewed in a similar vein. 'The games are like pieces of memory,' one woman told me. 'Those were, after all, our times.' Or, as a sales clerk explained when asked about the reasons for the *Ostalgie* products' commercial success: 'Some people can't quite let go of those times, you know. For others, it's a kind of fun joke. Many view it as a kind of remembrance game and buy it for their children to show them how things used to be.'

This woman's explanation reflects the multiple meanings of *Ostalgie* and the uses of memory in the former GDR. For many, these nostalgia games and products are camp, proving Marx's dictum true that history repeats itself as farce. For others embittered by the disappointments of re-unification, *Ostalgie* represents loss, belonging, solidarity, and a time that differentiates *Ossis*. Still others find the products of *Ostalgie* appealing as reminders of the daily hardships they have overcome through the collapse of socialism. *Ostalgie*, in all its various forms, thus does not entail an identification with the former GDR state, but rather an identification with different forms of oppositional solidarity and collective memory. It can evoke feelings of longing, mourning, resentment, anger, relief, redemption, and satisfaction – often within the same individuals.

To illustrate, I turn to another *Ostalgie* game, *Ferner Osten* ('Far East'), played at a birthday gathering of about twenty friends. Most of the game consists of answering trivia questions pertaining to everyday life in the GDR, and participants were asked, among other tasks, to list GDR actors, sing GDR rock group songs, and remember brand names of cigarettes, wine, beer, food, and other products available during socialist rule. Because all those in attendance were new to the game, the first round began with one player reading aloud the instructions, written in a tongue-in-cheek style that employed much socialist lingo:

In the last years, a large percentage of our population has suffered due to the fact that around 50 percent of the knowledge they acquired during the course of a life-time was rendered useless through sudden and unforeseeable events. The well-planned introduction of this board game will end this untenable situation! No one will laugh at you anymore if you can grab the price of a *Schlager* chocolate bar out of a hat, if you can tie a Pioneer [scarf] knot at lightening speed, or if you can name ten DEFA¹⁹ western films.

That's right, that's absolutely right!' several people agreed. One woman added: 'So much of what we knew back then suddenly didn't matter any more and much of it we have forgotten. Our children don't know it at all.'

The group became increasingly absorbed in the game as it got underway. When one team had won, the group started a new round. By the end of the evening and over three hours later, we had nearly made it through all of the trivia questions. Laughter and groans of recognition greeted details long forgotten. 'What were our candies called?' 'Who were our movie stars?' 'What were some of our magazines?' The frequent use of the term 'our' to denote certain boundaries of identification, inclusion, and exclusion was reflected in the structure of the game itself: the requisite detailed knowledge of GDR everyday life would have precluded any western German from participating. Indeed, when players didn't agree with an answer provided at the bottom of a game card, they would half-jokingly assert, 'A *Wessi* must have written that!' Amidst the fun and joking, there were also moments when a particular trivia fact prompted more intense discussion and reflection. After a multiple choice question concerning the price of a color television in the GDR (5,575 Marks), for example, one woman grew very animated and passionate when she recalled how much they had paid for theirs. 'We paid 6,000 marks. It was a huge sacrifice back then and that was if you could actually get one! We've forgotten this and even take the way things are now for granted. And the children, they don't even know about this and think they can have anything. That's not good!' The game thus provided an opportunity for amusement, remembering, the venting of resentments, as well as the expression of identification and affirmation of distinction as eastern Germans.

As I mentioned at the outset of this paper, many western Germans and eastern Germans alike have been quick to dismiss such practices as 'mere' nostalgia, 'pseudo' nostalgia, or 'just' another instance of German regionalism. What such allegations overlook, however, are the asymmetrical power relations in which these practices are embedded. Further, I would suggest, those who dismiss *Ostalgie* as trivial or inconsequential are similarly engaged

in a 'politics of significance': accusations of 'mereness' are often leveled at anthropology (Herzfeld 1997b). As I have argued elsewhere (Berdahl 1999), moments and processes of transition are not to be measured solely by their political outcomes. 'Ostalgic' and similar practices reveal and contest at a particularly dynamic historical moment official master narratives of a united Germany by proposing an alternative vision of 'Germanness' – of eastern German particularism and *Eigen-Sinn*.²⁰ In this sense, they reveal much about the process of transition itself.

My aim here in probing and questioning a distinction between history, memory, and nostalgia, then, is not to equate Honecker doubles with carefully documented and often richly sophisticated museum displays (like the Berlin *Wunderwirtschaft* exhibit). Certainly there are important distinctions to be made between choosing to drive a Trabi, purchasing an eastern German product, visiting a museum, and playing a board game. Rather, I am arguing for the need to examine an interplay among these various forms of remembering as well as the contextual deployment of terms and categories that dismiss some of these practices as 'mere' while validating others as 'history.' Such deployments are an important part of the processes through which, and the social domains in which, history and memory are produced.

Indeed, one of the principal criticisms of *Ostalgie* is that it provides a means of eliding questions of complicity, responsibility, and accountability in relation to a burdened GDR past – it 'neglects,' as one newspaper account put it, 'the necessary *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* [mastering of the past].'²¹ Underlying such accusations (which are not without some merit) are notions of the GDR past as something that must and can be mastered rather than an understanding of historical memory as an ongoing process of understanding, negotiation, and contestation. Indeed, dismissals and attempts to belittle *Ostalgie* may be viewed as part of a larger hegemonic project to devalue eastern German critiques of the politics of re-unification. More generally, the allegations of 'mereness' and accusations of neglect, as well as the culturally specific practices of *Ostalgie*, both reflect and constitute struggles over the control and appropriation of historical knowledge, shared memories, and personal recollections – all of which interact in highly complicated ways (cf. Lass 1994).

Following Foucault, Lila Abu-Lughod has advocated looking to resistance as a 'diagnostic of power' (1990). Resistance, she points out, signals sites of struggle, and a focus on these sites may illuminate important structures, practices, and relations of power. I am making a similar case here for exploring the details of oppositional modes of memory: a focus on oppositional memories

not only offers possibilities for reconceptualizing the domains in which history and memory are constructed and deployed (Bunzl 1998), but can reveal the specific workings of hegemonic forms of memory and 'official' historical knowledge. The re-memorization, re-appropriation, and ideological re-assertation²² of trivialities in the former GDR – ranging from the resuscitation of women's smocks during my fieldwork in the early 1990s to the 'cult-like' museum exhibits to the recent trivia games of recent years – unveil the workings of hegemonic memory-making in the new Germany. Or as Tobias Stregel, co-designer of the *Kost the Ost* card game, explained: 'The East was not only about Stasi files and barbed wire.'²³

Conclusion: Ostalgie for the Present

In a 1995 *Der Spiegel* cover story 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 Thuringer wurst is a resistance fighter.' Indeed, the marketing and consumption of *Ostalgie* represents a certain commodification of resistance, particularly when several of the supposedly eastern German products are now produced and distributed by western German firms. This framing of eastern German identities and of resistance to western German dominance in terms of product choices and mass merchandising entails a sort of *Ostalgie* for the present (to transform a phrase of Fredric Jameson's [1989]): practices that both contest and affirm the new order of a consumer market economy. In other words, to paraphrase De Certeau, consumers of *Ostalgie* may escape the dominant order without leaving it.

The archival practices of collection and display can have a similar, if unintended, implication. Imagine what it must be like for many eastern Germans to walk into a museum and be surrounded by the things in their own living rooms. The effect of such historicizations of the present is uncanny (in the sense of a 'strangeness of that which is most familiar' [Ivy 1995:23]); The past is connected to the present by distancing it in space and time. In the context of the museums as well as the *Ostalgie* games, East German objects – and, by metonymic association, the GDR itself – are things of the past, consigned to an officially sanctioned realm of obsolescence, memory, and amnesia (cf. Huyssen 1995).

Like other forms of re-memorizing, then, *Ostalgie* tells us more about the present than the past. The social lives of East German things, as Appadurai argues more generally in advocating a processual approach to commodities, illu-

minate long-term shifts in value and demand – broadly defined: shifts in the value of objects that are linked to re-valuations of a contested past and shifts in the demand for products that are connected to demands for visibility and recognition. In using available materials and languages for constructing defiance, identity, and solidarity, 'Ostalgic' practices reveal a highly complicated relationship between personal histories, disadvantage, dispossession, the betrayal of promises, and the social worlds of production and consumption. These practices thus not only reflect and constitute important identity transformations in a period of intense social discord, but also reveal the politics, ambiguities, and paradoxes of memory, nostalgia, and resistance, all of which are linked to the paths, diversions, and multiple meanings of East German things.

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Notes

1. I have chosen the hyphenated terms *re-unification* and *re-unified* to refer to the union of the FRG and the GDR on October 3, 1990. Although I am aware of the arguments that point to the teleological and ideological implications of the term *reunification*, as well as the fact that the territories united in 1990 do not represent Germany in an earlier state, I am also concerned that the omission of any allusion to a previous union (as in the term *unification*) silences critical elements of Germany's past as well. My use of the hyphen is thus a compromise, an effort to avoid the naturalizing connotations of *reunification* while reflecting a sensitivity to certain histories of divisions and recent restorations.
2. *Ossi* is a colloquial term for eastern Germans.
3. Postcommunist nostalgia is not unique to the GDR, although very little has been written about this phenomenon here or elsewhere in eastern Europe. For a very different angle, see Boym 1995.

4. The paper is thus also situated within contemporary discussions of history and memory, a literature too vast to cite extensively here. A relevant limited sample includes: discussions of 'official' and 'unofficial' memories (Watson 1994); collective memory (Connerton 1989; Halbwachs 1992; Nora 1989); the dialogical relationship between objects and memories (Berdahl 1994; Sturken 1997); commemorations and national memory (Bodnar 1992; Gillis 1994, Zerubavel 1995); oppositional and counter-memories (Bunzl 1998; Foucault 1977; Popular Memory Group 1982; Watson 1994).
5. 'Camp' has been a topic for American cultural critics as well as anthropologists (cf. Ivy 1995; Stewart 1993). Most relevant to my understanding here is Ross's observation that camp parodies 'the thing on its way out' (in Ivy 1995:56).
6. For an illuminating discussion of immediate post-Wall consumerism see Borneman 1991 and 1992.
7. One of the tragic stories about the disposal of East German products during this period concerned the discarding of books published in the GDR. There were reports of authors going to waste dumps to retrieve their published works.
8. Although Trabi jokes predate re-unification and were told throughout the GDR immediately following the fall of the Wall, they took on new meaning when re-appropriated in the tellings of West Germans. For more on jokes (including Trabi jokes) in the first years after the *Wende*, see Brednich 1990 and Stein 1993.
9. *Abwicklung*, meaning 'to unwind' as well as 'to liquidate,' entailed the restructuring of East German universities through the dissolution of departments and institutes, dismissal of East German faculty members (20 percent of professors and 60 percent of Mittelbau or intermediate ranks [Maier 1997:305]), the recruitment of West German academics and concomitant influx of West German research agendas.
10. 'Turning Point,' the term used to refer to the fall of the Berlin Wall and collapse of socialist rule.
11. For a sensitive and incisive account of the history and complexities of production ideologies in relation to actual labor practices in the GDR, see Lüdtkke 1994.
12. For discussions of the causes and consequences of East Germany's de-industrialization, see De Soto (n.d.) and Geyer 1994.
13. For example, the exhibits 'Wunderwirtschaft: DDR Konsumkultur und Produktdesign in den 60er Jahren' in Berlin; 'Tempolinsen und P2: Alltagskultur der DDR', first in Eisenhüttenstadt and then Berlin.
14. This phrasing stems from Douglas Coupland's novel, *Generation X* (1991, St. Martin's Press).
15. Defined by Herzfeld as a 'collective representation of an Edenic order – a time before time – in which the balanced perfection of social relations has not yet suffered the decay that affects everything human' (1997a:109).
16. In this sense, my analysis of nostalgia in the context of radical de-industrialization in the GDR resonates with Steinmetz's provocative analysis of right-wing violence ('nostalgia expressed as violence') in the context of contemporary Germany's transition from Fordism to Postfordism (Steinmetz 1994).
17. *Junge Pioniere* (Young Pioneers) and *FDJ* (*Freier Deutscher Jugend*) were two of three socialist youth organizations in the GDR.
18. In *Der Spiegel*, 55.

19. The East German Film Society.
20. *Eigen-Sinn* ('one's own sense' or 'one's own meaning'), is a multi-faceted term denoting self-will, self-affirmation, reappropriation, and playful autonomy. It is a central concept in Lüdtke's analysis of workers' everyday life and shopfloor dynamics (Lüdtke 1993a; see also Lüdtke 1993b), but has far broader and very useful implications for theorizing the dynamics of power, alienated social relations, and the politics of everyday life more generally.
21. *Freitag*, 20.12.1996, p. 19. *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, meaning 'overcoming' or 'mastering the past', was originally coined in reference to West Germany's attempts to deal with the Nazi past. (See for example Maier 1988). Since German re-unification, however, it is used to refer to East Germany's socialist past as well as the Nazi period. This discursive connection of the socialist with the Nazi past is one of several ways in which the GDR has been compared to the Third Reich.
22. To transform a phrase of the Comaroffs (1991).
23. In *Tagesspiegel*, 11.3.97, p. 26.

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