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Rifts in Time and in the Self: The Female Subject in Two
Generations of East German Women Writers (review)

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Cheryl Dueck. *Rifts in Time and in the Self: The Female Subject in Two Generations of East German Women Writers*. Amsterdamer Publikationen zur Sprache und Literatur, vol. 154. Ed. Cola Minis and Arend Quak. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004. 238 pp. ISBN 90-420-0937.

This detailed exploration of the work of four women authors of the German Democratic Republic (Christa Wolf, Brigitte Reimann, Helga Königsdorf, and Helga Schubert) singles out the representation of subjectivity as a common denominator in their GDR oeuvre and then follows the careers of three of them (Reimann died in 1973) beyond unification. Thoroughly researched, carefully documented, concisely and invitingly written, and explicit about its aims, methods, and conclusions, the book addresses a broad spectrum of readers, from beginners to specialists. Dueck usefully supplies all the historical contextualization one might wish for. But in particular this book recommends itself because its argument rings true. Dueck adopts what has been said before only inasmuch as it warrants resaying, and she argues new points that seem so true that one wonders why they were not made before.

Dueck employs the much-used “generation” approach to GDR women writers. In fact it makes excellent sense to pair Wolf and Reimann, who grew up in Nazi Germany, experienced the war, and enthusiastically helped create and develop the GDR, and contrast them with Königsdorf and Schubert, who grew up in the new state and took it for granted. The latter two are conscious of following in the footsteps, as writers, of the former two, especially Wolf; but their GDR work strikes its own note, one in which an interest in psychology is paramount and an affirmation of socialism not heard.

In writing about the theme of rifts in GDR literature written by women, Dueck likewise engages a veteran trope. The idea that women are fundamentally divided has been an axiom of feminist theory since Simone de Beauvoir. It has been echoed and reechoed by GDR women writers, especially Irntraud Morgner, whom Dueck does not treat. Yet it seems true to say that GDR women have been more afflicted by division than most women in other times and places: quickly pushed into the labour force, they were divided between their public, working selves and their lives as private individuals; and in their rapidly evolving social context one generation was divided from the other. Now, German unification has driven another rift through GDR women’s lives.

The writers chosen form an interesting foursome. While they have distinctly different styles and personalities, none of them strain at the central paradigm of the representation of subjectivity, as Morgner or Worgitzky might have done. The development of subjectivity is arguably the most important aspect of Christa Wolf’s GDR work. Christa Wolf, as Dueck points out, serves as a reference point for many other writers. Dueck interestingly demonstrates how the socialist subject concept clashes with another conception afloat in the GDR that it seems correct to identify as psychoanalytic. Certainly, the presence of Freudian psychoanalysis, although taboo in the GDR, does become palpable in Wolf’s later work, as in Königsdorf and Schubert. Whereas Marx championed “the free development of each,” GDR socialism “neglected to establish an adequate framework for the development of the individual” (42), so that any reexamination of subjectivity looked like heresy. Wolf’s and Reimann’s representations of divided female protagonists pursuing the utopian goal of becoming “whole” (Reimann) or coming to grips with their identities (Wolf) are radical projects under these circumstances.

Chapter 1 shows how psychology erupts into the discourse of socialist realism. Wolf and Reimann confront, indeed affront, socialist ideals with the psychological complexity of people. Dueck compares the dismayingly traditional gender roles in their early socialist realist works with the uncomfortable feminine subjectivity developed in *The Quest for Christa T.* (1968) and *Franziska Linkerhand* (1974). Chapter 2 foregrounds Reimann's accomplishments in *Franziska Linkerhand* and Wolf's in *Patterns of Childhood* against a thoughtful discussion of the vicissitudes of the Marxist subject concept. In Chapter 3 Dueck notes a paradigm shift away from Marxism and towards Freudianism in the late 1970s and argues persuasively that Königsdorf's and Schubert's stories of the 1970s and 1980s "are informed from the outset far more by Freudian psychoanalysis than by Marxist discourse" (164).

The book does not just diagnose the presence of psychoanalysis in the writers treated, but itself picks from a bouquet of psychoanalytic discourses (Freud, Lacan, Kristeva) in order to elaborate on the theme of the divided self, which psychoanalysis of course presumes. In chapter 1, the use of the term "hysteria" to characterize the women's malaise is a stretch, inasmuch as neither woman suffers from the conversion of a psychic disorder into a physical symptom that characterizes what Breuer and Freud called hysteria (and today is called "conversion disorder"). "Hysteria" is used loosely to designate feminine refusal of Lacan's "symbolic order" and in Juliet Mitchell's sense that "the woman novelist must be a hysteric," i.e., a woman writing in a man's voice. Christa T. and Franziska certainly are not women who nod and smile, but they do not therefore merit being called hysterics in any rigorous sense of the term.

Chapter 4 treats works published between 1983 and 1991, Wolf's *Cassandra*, Königsdorf's *Fission*, Schubert's *Women of Judas*, and Königsdorf's *Inconvenient Findings*. Written in a period of discouragement, stagnation, and fear in the GDR, these works, which make a theme of psychic or somatic illness and all directly or indirectly engage the National Socialist past, come to grips with what Dueck calls the "death drive" in society. The formal analysis of the works is illuminating here as elsewhere in this book. The critique of the antifeminist *Women of Judas* is well taken.

Chapters 5 and 6 constitute an extremely interesting reflection on what these women went on to write after unification. Dueck asserts that the exploration of subjectivity that the four authors pursued in the GDR period suffered an arrest. Wolf, massively attacked by the Western press for political opportunism and disingenuousness, rebutted with *Medea*, where the calumniated Medea reflects the maligned author in many ways. Medea is, Dueck points out, anomalous in Wolf's work, inasmuch as she is remarkably free of inner division. With *Leibhaftig* (2002) Wolf returns to a favourite reunification theme, that of the sickness of an age lived out in a woman's body or psyche. Dueck finds that Wolf weathered the political upheaval in her literary responses better than Schubert and Königsdorf. Schubert adopted a shrill anti-GDR stance and dropped gender issues, whereas Königsdorf, aside from two successful volumes of interviews, published some essays and elegiac fiction that employed "hollow typecasting" (155).