
The Role of the Outsider in Katja Lange-Müller's *Die Letzten* and *Böse Schafe*

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The figure of the societal outsider is a common literary *topos*. From Holden Caulfield in *Catcher in the Rye* to Beckmann in *Draußen vor der Tür*, such figures reveal the strengths and weaknesses of individuals and societies.¹ Outsiders can evoke sympathy and identification in the reader, a sense of pity for those who do not belong and who often have little power. At times, the outsider is portrayed as a victim, forced out of social, family, and emotional networks by forces larger than the individual. While often viewed as the oppressed, the disenfranchised, the losers of society, outsiders also can claim a particular sense of power. They are frequently individuals who have *chosen* to step outside the accepted rules of society, preferring isolation to conformity. They retain their individual will and voice, standing in opposition to the homogenizing influence of society. Outsiders inhabit a place apart, a place imbued with both weakness and power.

For an author, therefore, the figure of the outsider provides unique opportunities not only to portray individuals, but also to assess and critique social institutions, as outsiders are so clearly defined against the backdrop of social entities and structures. Outsiders are simultaneously products, victims, and critics of society, a part of it and apart from it. They exist within a society but do not necessarily embody its ideology, allowing the author to critically portray the flaws and failures of political and social regimes. Just as the outsiders themselves actually symbolize the experiences of many, so too do their interactions with those better integrated into society. A protagonist's individual experiences with family, friends, or state officials can be projected upon the larger societal backdrop and viewed in a much broader sense. These isolated individuals reveal a great deal about communities and society.

Katja Lange-Müller skillfully uses the tensions inherent to the figure of the outsider in her novels *Die Letzten: Aufzeichnungen aus Udo Posbichs Druckerei* (2000) and *Böse Schafe* (2007) to create characters who reveal the shortcomings and limitations of both East and West German society while not (merely) being victims.² Because they do not fully belong to *any* group—government, family, friends, colleagues—they can be used to reveal the workings and weaknesses of all.

Lange-Müller takes advantage of the dichotomies of the outsider, balancing their experiences of victimization with the critical voice such characters simultaneously embody. By situating her protagonists in a place apart, Lange-Müller creates room for a candid (and in the end readable) commentary on society, family, and relationships.

Published in 2000, *Die Letzten: Aufzeichnungen aus Udo Posbichs Druckerei* is Lange-Müller's first novel. The text portrays the last employees of Udo Posbich's privately owned printing company in 1970s East Germany. The closing of the company after Posbich's defection to Hamburg clearly explains the title *Die Letzten*, but the employees themselves can also be viewed as the *Allerletzten*—social and political misfits. As Daniel Sich posits, "Posbichs Laden offenbart sich rasch als Sammelbecken verschrobener Außenseiter." The protagonist Marita, quickly nicknamed Püppi by her colleague Fritz,³ has been fired from several state-run printing companies for her lack of skill and motivation. Her colleagues are even more colorful. There is Manfred, the schizophrenic who communes with the printing presses; Willi, who sneaks criticism of his mother into the blank spaces between words; and Fritz, who unknowingly carried the undeveloped placenta of his twin brother in his body for over twenty years. By chance, choice, and personality these figures are outsiders, occasionally banding together in a Land of the Misfit Toys version of collegiality.

Lange-Müller's 2007 novel *Böse Schafe* made the shortlist for the 2007 *Deutscher Buchpreis*. Set largely in late-1980s West Berlin, it traces the uneasy love affair between the East German refugee Soja and the West German drug-addict Harry. Narrated in the first-person by Soja over a decade later, the catalyst for the text is an old diary of Harry's written during their time together, a diary that Soja receives after Harry's death and in which she is never mentioned. Looking back on what she still considers her defining relationship, one that could have broken her, Soja reveals much about herself and her role as an outsider in East and West.

The role of the outsider in these two texts is particularly clear when viewed in three specific contexts: social institutions, the family, and intimate relationships. The three constellations reveal both the extent to which Soja and Püppi are outsiders in their personal and public lives, and Lange-Müller's use of the outsider for social critique. Far from being mere silent victims, however, both protagonists are also portrayed as writers who find a voice with which to challenge their isolation and exclusion. Finally, the figure of a defiant outsider is found not only in the protagonists and their writing, but also is reflected in the media portrayals of Katja Lange-Müller herself.

The female protagonists of these texts share some general biographical characteristics: both grew up in the GDR, and brief autobiographical information

places their birth years in the late 1940s or early 1950s. Little is recounted of their childhood and teenage years, other than isolated incidents revolving around family and school. Both Soja and Püppi appear to fulfill GDR societal expectations up to a certain point, by completing school and vocational training as typesetters [*Setzer*]. But even while situating her protagonists within everyday GDR society, Lange-Müller marks them as outsiders by making them both left-handed, as she is herself. It is worth noting that left-handed children in the GDR were “taught” to be right-handed long after Western scientists and psychologists had discovered the negative effects of this practice. Margot Honnecker, *Volksbildungsministerin*, was a well-known proponent of forced right-handedness (Werner). Soja refers to herself as “Ich handwerklich unbegabte Linkshänderin” (*Schafe* 131) and Püppi recalls her “Scham über meine linkshändige Stümperei” (*Letzten* 12). Physiology made both women less than ideal candidates for the strongly right-hand oriented career of typesetting, but it was the vocational training system of the GDR that would not (or could not) direct them to something more suitable. Upon first reading, this subtle criticism may escape many readers (although probably not those who are themselves left-handed). In the end, however, it is the very subtlety and unexpectedness of the criticism that makes it powerful. Readers are conditioned to expect portrayals of the rigidity and opacity of the GDR state, but often in the obvious figures of *Stasi* agents or police officers. Left-handers vainly struggling to complete tasks inherent to their jobs are not necessarily viewed as social criticism. Lange-Müller uses the protagonists’ relatively minor difference from the rest of society to reveal the shortcomings of the GDR system; Soja and Püppi are misguided in their vocational training, marginalized in their careers, and ultimately pushed to the fringes of society. Their experiences can be read as a critique of the GDR’s failure to truly respond to the needs of its citizens, and as a reminder of the inflexibility of its bureaucracy.

Along with the subtle social critique of left-handedness, Lange-Müller also includes more expected, nearly stereotypical, episodes of regime critique. Püppi’s experiences with the police initially read like many other East German citizen-police interactions. On the day that Posbich’s print shop is closed due to a “dringender Verdacht auf eine strafbare Handlung” (*Letzten* 77), all of the workers are interviewed by the police. Ushered into a “filmhaft albern” (80) scene, Püppi is first belittled by the officers, deemed “nicht gerade eine Leuchte im Beruf” (81). She then must endure a lecture about the “weakness” of the GDR school system that awards nearly everyone some sort of certificate, with the underlying accusation that it is only because of the regime’s generosity that Püppi has her typesetting certification. As a final jab, an officer adds, “Haben Sie ein Schwein, daß wir hier nicht im Westen sind, wo die Versager in der Gosse landen” (81). The

contrast is clear: the police represent the GDR system and Püppi represents those who exist at its fringes.

Lange-Müller is not interested in portraying mere victims of the GDR regime, however. While Püppi is rejected by the system, she also knows how to make use of its jargon. When asked to respond to questions, she uses phrases such as “Zugang zu meiner Wirkungsstätte verwehrt” (82) and reminds the officers that she has, “wie jeder Bürger dieses Landes, ein Recht auf Arbeit” (82). The phrases are much like lines in a play, printed within quotation marks even in the text. In recalling the incident, Püppi terms her responses rubbish [*Stuβ*] (82), an obvious indicator that she deliberately used the jargon of the regime to suit her purposes. Although Püppi is not fully accepted as a member of GDR society, she is savvy enough to adopt its language and behavior when needed; her social exclusion is not an indication that she doesn’t know how to play the game. The reader is not presented with a simple insider-outsider, good-bad dichotomy, but rather a credible portrayal and critique of social power and belonging.

In *Böse Schafe*, Lange-Müller more overtly positions the protagonist Soja as outside the political regime of the GDR by placing her in opposition to her mother Alma Krüger, “zweiter Sekretär der Bezirksparteileitung Berlin” (97). Alma named her daughter after her idol Soja Kosmodemjanskaja, a Russian communist partisan killed by the Nazis in 1941. Soja rejects her mother’s ideological convictions and political strivings, embarrassed by “der politische Ehrgeiz, der sie jeden Tag ein bißchen mehr aufblähte” (96). In a teenage attempt to express her feelings, Soja recalls: “einmal, als sie nachts vor dem Kühlschrank hockte und in eine Salami biß, schlich ich mich hinterrücks ganz nah an sie heran, erschreckte sie mit den Worten: Bald wirst du platzen—vor Stolz” (96). The dissociation from SED politics and political ambition is clear. But once again, Lange-Müller does not merely equate SED politics with bad and political noninvolvement with good; instead, she complicates the mother-daughter relationship and the insider-outsider positions by continuing Soja’s reflections about her mother:

Unbeirrbar ... stieg sie die Karriereleiter hoch. Aus der drallen FDJlerin mit der tiefen, im sächsischen Tonfall die banalsten Torheiten verkündenden Stimme war eine Parteifunktionärin geworden, und daran, was aus der werden konnte, werden würde, wenn alles den üblichen sozialistischen Gang ging, mochte ich gar nicht denken, weil es mir Angst machte; allerdings nur um meinewillen, denn ich war, es ließ sich nicht leugnen, Fleisch vom Fleische dieser Frau. Kurz, ich schämte mich—vor ihr und für sie. (96)

Even in her disgust and anger toward her mother, Soja recognizes that she herself has the potential of becoming like Alma. As a product of GDR society, Soja has

internalized some of its teachings, and one could argue that the desire for power is inherent not only in authoritarian societies, but in humans themselves. Such a portrayal of the protagonist reminds readers that even outsiders are shaped by society; Soja's candid self-assessment ultimately makes her role as social critic that much more credible.

It is therefore fitting that Soja's sole experience with using political power positions her as both an insider and an outsider. As a teenager, she stupidly risks her life by jumping down onto the streetcar tracks to grab a pack of cigarettes. She is unable to climb back up on the platform, which eventually brings the streetcar personnel and police running to save her. Assuming Soja meant to kill herself over an unhappy love affair, the men console her, coming across as surprisingly humane East German officials. With Soja's admission that she was only after the cigarettes, however, the situation radically changes. Immediately the officers demand to see her papers. When she cannot produce any ID, they threaten to take her to the police station. Realizing she has gotten herself in over her head, Soja does what she otherwise never does: she uses her mother's political position for her advantage. The effect is immediate: "Rolfs Griff lockerte sich, als habe man mit einem Betäubungsgewehr auf ihn geschossen" (97). Although now protected by her mother's power, Soja is also ashamed by the abrupt overturning of the typical police-citizen relationship. The mere mention of her mother's name makes Soja the antagonist and places her in a position of power over the others involved in the situation. Any doubt of Soja's story on the part of a policeman or judge could mean the end of his career. Soja's borrowing of her mother's power rescues her from this unpleasant situation, but it does not help her belong anywhere. Although Soja, like Püppi, knows how to play the system, it does not make her a part of it. Instead it serves to underscore her outsider status, isolating her through her threatened use of threat of power and the policemen's ensuing fear.

Lange-Müller does not limit her social criticism to the easy target of the GDR, however. She also uses her character's outsider status to critique *West* German society and institutions. Her portrayal of the West German police during a search of Soja's apartment emphasizes the heavy-handed use of authority apparent on both sides of the Wall. Raiding Soja's apartment in the middle of the night after her phone number and address were found in the possession of a dead drug dealer, the police treat Soja as if she must be involved in the drug trade. They trick her into opening the door, search her person and apartment, and brusquely respond to her request for information with: "Nicht Sie stellen hier die Fragen, erst einmal haben wir welche" (175). One officer refers to Soja as "Sie welkes Blumenkind aus dem nahen Osten" (176). Although the matter is eventually resolved and the police

officers leave the apartment, even their parting comment to Soja underscores their intimidating behavior: “glauben Sie nicht, Sie wären schon raus aus der Partie” (178). Once again Soja finds herself on the fringes of society, at least tangentially involved in the world of drugs, looked upon as an outsider by officers of the law. The fact that she is innocent initially plays little role; instead the emphasis is on the behavior of the police, behavior eerily reminiscent of the land that Soja has chosen to leave behind.

Soja’s position of outsider in both East and West German society is magnified by the events of German unification. In the days after the Wall opens, Soja is visited by East German friends she has not seen in three years. Her reaction reveals both her distance from GDR society and her incomplete assimilation into life in West Berlin: “Ich kann nicht behaupten, daß ich mich unbändig freute. Mein einziges Privileg, das darin bestanden hatte, vor dem jähnen Ende des ‘antifaschistischen Schutzwalls’ in den Westen gegangen zu sein, fiel mit der Mauer” (193). Suddenly surrounded by other East German outsiders, Soja fears losing one of the few advantages of her existence, the exotic status of one who had escaped the GDR. After so many years of occupying a place apart—in both East and West Germany—Soja runs the risk of becoming just another face in the crowd. In her effort to avoid this, she moves to Switzerland and marries Urs, the latently homosexual gardener she met on November 9. She writes of feeling that East and West Berlin were both dissolving, and that she fears the same for herself: “Ich ... hatte befürchtet, daß ich mich ebenso auflösen und womöglich verschwinden würde; da war ich lieber woandershin verschwunden. Fremd zu sein in der Schweiz fand ich normaler, als fremd zu werden in zwei Städten, die nicht bleiben konnten, was sie waren” (198). Once again, Soja *chooses* to be the outsider, starting a new life in a new city rather than watch the collapse of the life (or lives) she has known. Lange-Müller captures the feelings of many Berlin residents who had previously seen their city as a place apart, an “outsider” among German cities.⁴

After a brief marriage, a newly divorced Soja returns to Berlin in 1992, moving back into her old apartment and buying part-ownership of a florist shop. For a time, it appears as if West German society has a place for her. By 1996, however, the shop is bankrupt. Rather than being a productive part of society, Soja is once again pushed to the fringes, unemployed and living on welfare, a fate shared by many in post-unification Berlin. With her job skills as a typesetter long out-of-date and little hope of additional job training, it is as if German society is rejecting Soja. She will never be considered financially or socially successful. The society that once represented all that the GDR could not offer now reveals itself as a

failed dream. The flawed realities of East, West, and post-unification Germany are encompassed in the experiences of the outsider Soja.

If GDR law viewed the family as the “kleinste Zelle” of socialist society (*Familiengesetzbuch*), then Lange-Müller’s portrayal of family relationships in her novels is a harsh criticism of both institutions. Presented in a few brief scenes, these experiences paint an incomplete but telling picture of the effects of childhood family experiences. In *Die Letzten*, Lange-Müller actually shifts narrators, using letters from Püppi’s colleague Willi to carry the plot. Writing to his sister after his mysterious “disappearance” in the USSR, Willi reveals the truth about his emotionally abusive mother, a woman who manipulated him with her passive-aggressive tactics, who so coveted male attention that she treated her son as a stand-in for her dead husband, a woman from whom he longed to escape: “Du weißt nicht, wie schwer es für mich war, Mutter sehen, hören, riechen, anfassen zu müssen” (107). Desperate for an outlet for his feelings, Willi eventually begins manipulating printing jobs, literally creating meaning out of nothing by forming letters out of the white spaces between words. His first message, hidden within the pages of a “Publikation des Turnvereins ‘Blau-Grün,’” was the word MUTTERSAU (116). As he explains to his sister: “Du verstehst, wirklich wichtig war mir nur, daß ich Mutter beschimpfen, beleidigen, verhöhnen konnte. Ohne den Mund aufzumachen, ohne zu schreiben im üblichen Sinne, schrieb ich über Mutter, was immer mir einfiel” (117). Once Willi’s “Ventil” (106) is taken from him with the closing of Posbich’s print shop, his only release is physical distance; Willi follows the trail of a possible fellow silent screamer to Taschkent.

It is striking that Lange-Müller includes nearly no information about Püppi’s childhood and family experiences in this text. By situating both Püppi and Willi as *die Letzten*, however, the author suggests a connection in their experiences. Both are outsiders, both struggle in similar ways. This one-step-removed portrayal of simultaneously suffocating and alienating family dynamics actually serves to strengthen Lange-Müller’s critique of the family. It is no longer “just” Püppi who perhaps struggles with the *kleinste Zelle* of GDR society; her plight is shared by others.

Soja’s family experiences as portrayed in *Böse Schafe* also serve as a harsh criticism because they point to sexual impropriety. Recounting a childhood memory of making her mother proud by daring to dive into a lake, Soja also remembers how her jubilation turned to shock as her father swam up behind her and “meine kleinen Brüste quetschte wie Zitronenhälften” (53). Even as an adult, Soja carries with her “Verzweiflung darüber, daß meine dumme Mutter nie irgendetwas gemerkt hat und ich ihr all die Jahre nichts sagen konnte” (53), the word “nie” implying that this was not the only case of such behavior. Carrying such secrets

binds children to their abusers while simultaneously isolating them from the other parent, placing them at the center of family dynamics while never allowing them to truly belong.

Soja's first kiss from Harry also reveals (latent) inappropriate behavior on the part of her father. She describes it as a "Kinderkuß" (45)—not a kiss from a child, but a kiss for a child—and realizes that she has never experienced such a kiss. It is only as an adult that Soja realizes, "daß schon die Vaterküsse, die das Sojalein einst hinnahm, runterschluckte wie klumpigen Reisbrei, Männerküsse gewesen ware, ungekonnte zudem, die es nicht gemocht, aber für alternativlos gehalten hatte" (46). The family here does not function as a place of safety and support, but one of silence and shame. Children are misused and marginalized, becoming adults who are emotionally scarred and isolated.

Lange-Müller's portrayal of family in both texts is a highly critical one. The reader is presented with limited information, and nearly all of that is negative. The GDR families portrayed here are dysfunctional and emotionally crippling; there are no examples of happy, healthy families. It appears as if there is something within the institution of the family itself that is dysfunctional. Whether specifically aimed at GDR society or at society in general, Lange-Müller makes clear her skepticism and even cynicism about parent-child (family) relationships.

The protagonists' roles of outsider extend beyond the family and workplace into their intimate relationships as adults. Both Soja and Püppi struggle with emotional closeness with friends and partners. They are often alone, and their attempts at emotional connection are often misguided, uncomfortable, and unsuccessful. Their efforts to establish relationships are repeatedly rebuffed or manipulated, leaving the protagonists isolated not only from society but from the very individuals to whom they wish to be closest.

One seemingly small matter that reveals the underlying distance between the protagonists and others is their (nick)names. Names offer a sense of identity, but they also can separate and isolate. For Soja, whose name was recognizable in the GDR, life in West Berlin is a continual reminder of her strangeness. In the West, the most common reaction to her first name is "Bohne oder Soße?" (15). If her name is a joke to others, is Soja herself a joke, someone who can be laughed at and soon forgotten? Marita, in contrast, is essentially robbed of her name. Dubbed Püppi within the first few pages of the text, the protagonist's real name is not mentioned until page 95, and then only once. This nearly exclusive use of her nickname underscores Püppi's status as outsider—while her colleague Fritz cared enough to give her a nickname, it is a derogatory one. It is much easier to devalue and ignore someone referred to as "Püppi, die einarmige blaue Elefantin" than a

woman accorded the respect of her actual name. But an individual desperate for acceptance and friendship will tolerate this new name and identity.

For Püppi, friendship appears to be limited to her casual connection with her coworkers at the printing shop. The men take her out for drinks to welcome her to the shop (21), but there is otherwise little contact outside of work. Püppi is most often alone, spending weekends in bed with several bottles of her favorite alcohol, Kreuz des Südens (19, 41). Her retreat from reality can be seen as both a cause of and a reaction to her isolation and loneliness. When her “ehemalige Freundin” (45) Rita unexpectedly arrives and knocks on the apartment door, Püppi realizes that no one has knocked on her door in the entire time she has lived there. Püppi’s withdrawal from social interaction seems to mirror the lack of interest that others show in her. Socially she is cut off from other young women, from old and new female friends.

This disconnect from female friendship is complicated by Püppi’s past romantic interest in Rita. She refers to Rita as “diese Frau, für die ich mich dereinst hätte in Stücke reißen lassen” (71), and the reader eventually discovers that Rita played a central role in causing and ruining Püppi’s former marriage to her boyfriend Ernst. Püppi has been left with a deep mistrust of her former friend as well as the emotional scars from an unsuccessful marriage. Neither men nor women seem able to provide the emotional closeness that Püppi so obviously desires.

It briefly appears as if Püppi’s isolation may draw to an end when she meets her colleague Fritz, whom she views as “eine gelungene und doch irgendwie auch unglücklich geratene Mischung aus Andy Warhol, Klaus Kinski, Hans Albers und Heino” (15). In a Hollywood movie the two socially awkward, outcast colleagues would fall in love and live happily ever after. Lange-Müller, however, quickly removes any possibility of such a predictable happy ending. Fritz does open his heart to Püppi, but only to share with her the story (and sight) of his twin brother—a twin brother who did not fully develop, was never born, and was surgically removed from Fritz’s abdomen like a tumor.⁵ Unsure of how to respond to such a story, Püppi begins to seduce Fritz, only to be told gently that he has lost all sexual interest since he found out about his twin. After their evening together, Fritz studiously avoids Püppi, who is hurt, but not completely surprised:

Warum sollte einer, der die operative Befreiung von seinem allein nicht lebensfähigen Zwillingssparasiten mit einer Art Kaiserschnittgeburt verwechselte, scharf sein auf eine Frau? Und dann noch auf eine, der—mangels bessere Trümpfe—nichts weiter übrigblieb, als auch die Mutter zu markieren, eine dicke graue Mutter, die heuchelte, was man von ihr erwartete: Verständnis, Mitleid und Trost. (36)

In her attempt to physically and emotionally connect with Fritz, Püppi has actually broadened the gap between them. Once again, she is left standing outside the very relationship(s) she so desires. True emotional intimacy appears to remain an unattainable fantasy for Püppi.

Püppi struggles with her desire for emotional and physical intimacy and the results of that desire. She longs for a connection with Rita, Ernst, and Fritz, but ultimately is rejected or mistreated by each of them. The desire for some emotional connection remains, however, and finds its expression in an unexpected “relationship.” Hurt by negative experiences in friendship as well as heterosexual and homosexual romantic relationships, Püppi chooses to love something that cannot hurt her or push her away—a plant—and develops a sudden fascination for a gloxinia she sees at the florist shop. She even calls her response “Liebe auf den ersten Blick” (40). A long weekend drinking in bed suddenly is filled with the prospect of watching her plant “blühen, blühen, daß mir die Tränen kämen” (41). She refers to the plant as her “neue[r] Liebling” (44) and treats it as a combination lover and child. The fresh loneliness caused by Fritz’s rejection is soothed by the new object of her affection. In a bizarre but fitting conclusion, Püppi’s rival Rita shows up with another plant that emits fumes that cause the gloxinia to die. Once again, Püppi is alone.

While humorous, Püppi’s turn to such an unusual object of affection can also be read as a strong critique of the frailty of human intimacy, physical and emotional. Even in relationships that should be close, emotional defenses remain high. Nobody in Püppi’s world seems ready to accept the vulnerability that comes from revealing one’s truest feelings and deepest secrets. Lange-Müller paints a bleak picture of intimacy. By setting her novel in the GDR, she also invites the interpretation of this situation as a criticism of GDR society itself. Perhaps there is something inherent in East German socialist society that makes intimacy impossible?

It comes as no surprise, however, that Lange-Müller’s criticism also carries over to West Germany. True closeness, it appears, is impossible in either—perhaps any existing—society. Such struggles for emotional connection are also evident in Soja’s life in *Böse Schafe*. She also has no close friends in West Berlin, partly because she is newly defected from the GDR, and partly because she also lives a very isolated life. Officially unemployed, she occasionally works at a flower stand. Her acquaintances consist of other transplants to Berlin, and there is a sense of impermanency and superficiality in relationships. When trying to assemble a group of people to help watch over Harry as he goes through drug rehab, Soja admits: “Es war mir peinlich, Menschen, die ich kaum kannte, um Hilfe zu bitten” (68). Lacking a social group to which she truly belongs, Soja must rely upon the kindness of near strangers.

Since coming to the West, Soja has also struggled in her intimate relationships with men, a marked change from her life in the GDR: “Dabei hatte mancher Mann, der neben mir oder in den übrigen Regionen unseres Ländchens aufgewachsen war, meine unkomplizierte, nicht nach fester Bindung strebende Art durchaus geschätzt” (20). In her new life, however, Soja is unable to connect, feeling that the men she meets are wrapped in “Klarsichtfolie” (21). She can see them, talk with them, but she can’t really touch them or interest them in her as a woman. While she is now free to live her life as she wishes, Soja is an outsider in the West, unable to connect on a physical or an emotional level, still searching for true emotional connection and intimacy.

Harry’s arrival marks a sudden end to Soja’s isolation. “Allmählich begriff ich, daß ich nun auch hier einen Menschen kannte, einen männlichen zudem, der nicht in solch einem durchsichtigen Sack steckte” (30). Although Harry is a West German, Soja senses he is perhaps someone with whom she can connect, a fellow outsider looking to belong. Soja’s optimism and relief in finding Harry allow her to overlook a host of unsettling facts, including his previous prison sentence, his drug use, and his criminal friends. Soja is tired of existing on the fringes, of being the outsider looking in on (West German) life, and views Harry as the solution.

While the comparison may at first seem ludicrous, Harry plays a role in Soja’s life similar to the gloxinia in Püppi’s life in *Die Letzten*. Neither the plant nor Harry is a healthy or supportive partner. But while being overly obsessed with a plant is generally considered harmless, a relationship with an ex-convict drug user is perilous. In both instances, female protagonists have vainly searched for appropriate romantic partners; their resultant choices reflect a cynicism on Lange-Müller’s part about emotional intimacy. East or West, heterosexual or homosexual, healthy romantic relationships seem not to exist for these figures. They are outsiders looking in on a largely partnered—but ultimately isolated—society.

Entering into a relationship with Harry actually does little to change this status for Soja. Caught up in his own addiction, Harry is emotionally unavailable. He enjoys sex with Soja and allows her at least limited access to his life, but he is never truly a partner to her. Once again Soja is portrayed as an outsider looking in upon her own life. What is striking, however, is that Lange-Müller does not solely present Soja as the victim of poor choices and social isolation. Soja actually draws strength from Harry’s emotional unavailability. His walls force her to rely upon herself:

Weißt du, Harry, wie ich den bewundert und gehaßt habe, deinen üblichen Blick aus extrem geweiteten Pupillen, der mich absichtslos bezwang, der mir, da er unvergleichlich ruhig, aber leer war, völlige Deutungsfreiheit einräumte und doch

dafür sorgte, daß jeder meiner Projektionsversuche an dir abprallte, der mich, wie eine schwarze Welle, immer wieder auf mich selbst zurückwarf, was einerseits Kraft kostete, andererseits stark machte. (43)

The very aspects of the relationship that position Soja as a victim or a fool are also the aspects which cause her—albeit unwillingly—to be strong, to rely on herself, to survive after Harry. Soja may be an outsider, but she is not merely an object of pity. In the end, she finds the strength to stand on her own even apart from society.

While Soja and Püppi are marginalized and isolated in their careers, families, and intimate relationships, their role as outsider is not that of a silent victim. Relegated to capturing the thoughts and words of others in their jobs as typesetters, both women also discover for themselves the power of the written word. In writing their own stories, both women rescue themselves from victimhood. They are not simply carried along by historical events and poor personal choices; instead they are keen, detailed observers and critics. Writing is an act of power, giving voice to the outsiders.⁶ Their place apart is not merely a place of weakness and alienation, but also a place of independence and appraisal. Amidst the pain of reading Harry's journal, Soja uses writing as a cathartic conversation with Harry, as a chance, "dir alles zu erzählen" (114). It makes little difference that Harry will never read Soja's text; its importance rests in the fact that the eternal outsider makes her voice heard. The last passage of the novel, on the whole rather melancholy, underscores the power and hope of writing: "Ich war dabei, mich aufzugeben, bis ich dein Heft las und entdeckte, daß ich ja mit dir reden, dir sogar schreiben kann" (205). While serving as a connection to Harry, writing also serves to ground and legitimize Soja's life experiences. In *Die Letzten*, Lange-Müller takes this self-assertion even further, making Püppi a published author who is garnering public attention (95); Püppi's radio interview serves as a catalyst for Udo Posbich forwarding Willi's letters and therefore grounds the rest of the novel. Soja and Püppi, often excluded, ignored and ostracized, in the end have the last word. These outsiders are neither weak nor silent.

The image of the outsider, particularly one who claims her own personal voice, does not end with Soja and Püppi; Katja Lange-Müller herself seems to share a place apart with her protagonists. Both Lange-Müller's biography and the media image of the author offer tantalizing connections to her characters. Like Soja, Lange-Müller has a troubled relationship with her powerful mother: Inge Lange was a candidate of the *Zentralkomitee der SED* and the *Politbüro*, and mother and daughter no longer have contact with one another.⁷ Like Soja and Püppi, Lange-Müller also trained as a typesetter; like Soja, she later worked as a nurse in a closed psychiatric unit. In 1984 she defected to West Berlin, where she still resides.

In a 2007 interview with *FAZ* journalist Johanna Adorján about the novel *Böse Schafe*, Lange-Müller refutes any idea that the text is autobiographical: “Es ist nicht autobiographisch, das ist nicht meine Geschichte.” In the same interview, however, Lange-Müller responds to the parallels between herself and Soja with the following comment: “Klar, diese Momente wollte ich mit hineinbringen.... Das ist eine Sache, die beim Schreiben extrem wichtig ist. Man kann sehr viel recherchieren und wird der Geschichte dennoch kein Leben einhauchen, wenn man von Dingen schreibt, die durch die eigene Erfahrung nicht geerdet sind.” Like many authors, Lange-Müller draws upon autobiographical elements—“das, was man kennt” (Adorján)—to make her writing much more believable. While *Die Letzten* and *Böse Schafe* are not Lange-Müller’s autobiography, both texts contain moments, experiences, and memories based upon her life.

Perhaps even more striking is the way in which the media uses Lange-Müller’s biography to position her as a rebellious outsider within the GDR regime. While in the tenth grade, she was expelled from school “wegen unsozialistischen Verhaltens” (Blattmann).⁸ Most biographies merely say that Lange-Müller was expelled and that she eventually completed an apprenticeship. Only a few sources mention that the teenager was able to complete *Oberschule*, albeit at a different school in Berlin.⁹ While the incident did exclude her from potential university studies, it does not appear to have relegated her to the fringes of GDR society. The rebellious behavior that led to her expulsion, however, is highlighted in nearly every biographical article and in many book reviews and interviews, with phrasing ranging from “un-socialistic behavior” (“Katja Lange-Müller’s Novel”) to “antisozialistische Äußerungen” (Geissler) to “jahrelang[r] impulsiv[e] Widerstand gegen die höchsten wie die lächerlichsten Bevormundungen” (Delius). Also found in the widely respected *Kritisches Lexikon zur deutschsprachigen Gegenwartsliteratur*, this phrase—“wegen unsozialistischen Verhaltens”—has become part of the image of Lange-Müller perpetuated by scholars and journalists alike. One short phrase signals her separation from the GDR regime, her status as outsider, and positions her as a compelling and legitimate critic of its machinations.

In her novels, and perhaps even in her public image, Katja Lange-Müller utilizes the intrinsic tensions and dichotomies of the societal outsider. She explores issues of belonging and excluding, connection and loneliness, East and West. By creating characters who are outsiders looking in on society, the author is better able to address the failings and inconsistencies of society itself. She portrays the inherent isolation many experience in their interactions with friends and family, the inflexibility of state institutions and officials, and the emotional strengths and scars of those on the outside looking in. While her depictions of German

society reveal a certain cynicism and unflinching candidness, Lange-Müller's figures are not solely helpless victims. As outsiders, Soja and Püppi reflect both the shortcomings of society and the tenacity of the individual. They occupy a place apart—a place of isolation but also of eloquence and power.

Notes

¹ Much research exists on the topic of the outsider in literature, ranging from Colin Wilson's 1956 classic *The Outsider* to the more recent proceedings of the 2008 conference, *The Image of the Outsider II* (Wright and Kaplan). The title of the 2008 Society for the Interdisciplinary Study of Social Imagery conference is a reference to its 2002 conference, *The Image of the Outsider in Literature, Media and Society*.

² Lange-Müller views *Die Letzten, Böse Schafe*, and her earlier text *Verfrühte Tierliebe* as a trilogy. "Die Protagonisten heißt immer anders, ist aber doch dieselbe Figur" (Mohr). Issues of outsider status are also explored in the third text.

³ Marita's full nickname is "Püppi, die einarmige blaue Elefantin" (13), a reference to her left-handedness, large ears, and poor circulation.

⁴ The role of Berlin as a divided and unified city is addressed in many interviews and book reviews. See Diel and Steinert. Lange-Müller also addresses the symbolism of Berlin in her interview for the Wilhelm-Raabe Prize (Winkels 114-141).

⁵ Further analysis of this motif is offered by Katharina Gerstenberger.

⁶ Other outsiders in Lange-Müller's texts also gain a voice through their writings: Harry in his journal and Willi in his "white space" texts.

⁷ For a candid assessment of Lange-Müller's attitudes about her family, see her interview in *Die Horen* ("Von Physis").

⁸ When asked about this in interviews, Lange-Müller says she thinks it was for imitating Ulbricht.

⁹ See the entry "Katja Lange-Müller" on the *kiwi-verlag* website or Cornelia Geissler's book review.

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