
Volume 4
Issue 1 (2005)
*Assorted Articles plus Two Poroi Symposia on
Emotions*

DOI: 10.13008/2151-2957.1030
pps. 54-59

Race from Berlin to Louisville: An Introduction

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Recommended Citation

Throgmorton, James A. "Race from Berlin to Louisville: An Introduction." *Poroi* 4, Iss. 1 (2005): p. 54-59 <https://doi.org/10.13008/2151-2957.1030>

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Race from Berlin to Louisville

An Introduction

James A. Throgmorton

Poroi, 4, 1, March, 2005



- 1 Not long ago I made a keynote speech at a conference in Louisville, Kentucky about sustainability (Throgmorton, 2004a). In brief, I argued that there is a reciprocal relationship between city making and story telling. To make the Louisville region more sustainable, the people of that city would have to make narrative and physical space for diverse storytellers. Their shared urban narratives would need to be locally grounded and include black Louisvillians. From this point of view, the city's new Muhammad Ali Center could act as a powerful trope in persuasive stories about making Louisville a more sustainable place.
- 2 After I had finished, one of the conference's participants, an older man from Europe, came up to me and asked with some surprise, "Tell me, is it true that race and racism are still issues in America?" Another participant, a young man from Germany, told me he had been watching the African-Americans in the audience. He thought they looked uncomfortable when hearing my words.
- 3 Do race and racism still matter in the United States? Much rides on how we define the two terms.
- 4 In a recent study of race, real estate, and uneven development in the Kansas City (Missouri) region, sociologist Kevin Gotham (2002) claims that there are no timeless and universal standards for what constitutes *race* and *racism*. Rather he says, "Racial groups are socially and politically constructed and exist as the outcome of diverse historical practices . . . that are continually subject to challenge over definition and meaning" (p. 13). If that is true, the specific meanings and manifestations of racism are "not only historically contingent, but are also always changing as social conditions, state activity, and social movements confront it" (p. 11). Consequently Gotham uses *racialization* as a frame for understanding racial residential segregation in Kansas City. By this, he means, "the way in which racial categories sort people, society distribute resources along racial lines, and state policy

shapes and is shaped by the racial contours of society” (p. 12).

- 5 If race and racism are socially constructed, and if the meanings of specific racisms and racial identities depend on historical and political contexts where they appear, we could expect race and racism to vary from one time or place to the next. Much could be learned, therefore, by studying changes in specific places and by comparing places for their meanings of racial distinctions and racisms. Here Christine Gerhardt works from American Studies to examine race and racism in Berlin (Germany), while Leslie Hahner comes from Communication Studies to study race and racism in Louisville (USA). Apparently disparate, these studies are instructive in juxtaposition.
- 6 In “What Was Left of Berlin Looked Bleaker Every Day,” Gerhardt analyzes the urban spatiality of Berlin – what she calls “Germany’s most ‘American’ city (p. 1) – as it has been imagined in American literature since the fall of the Wall (*die Mauer*). She accomplishes this by focusing on three American texts published since 1989. Each foregrounds issues of racial and ethnic differences. The texts differ considerably, but Gerhardt shows how Berlin emerges in all three as an imaginative site where Americans can explore troublesome aspects of America’s cultural history. Particularly they can explore issues related to race, without risking their own positive sense of American identity. As Gerhardt says, these writers “view . . . the new Berlin as a space where Germany’s multiple histories of racial conflict and oppression converge.” This “creates a city whose apparently unresolved legacies contrast sharply with America’s ideal of its own national history as a continuous progression toward increasing liberation and equality” (p. 24). Yet these texts can, she concludes, also “be read as imaginative memorials to an almost mythical, pre-1989 city that seemed to embody and confirm American democratic ideals – and as memorials to a time in U. S. history when American culture was as much a part of Berlin’s urban realities as Berlin was part of America’s self-identity” (p. 24).
- 7 In “From the Louisville Lip to the Champ,” Leslie Hahner investigates how the figure of Muhammad Ali and stories of his past are being used to advance efforts to redevelop downtown Louisville, especially through the proposed Muhammad Ali Center. How, she asks, did a boxer from the segregated black section of Louisville become the city’s beloved humanitarian son? Ali grew up with “polite racism” in a city divided by race. How did he move from “the Louisville Lip” to “The Champ,” and how do

these moves tie to the new Ali Center? In Hahner's view, the Center uses stories of the past for current purposes. "As a material place, the Ali Center is important for what it indicates about networks of relations in Louisville" (p. 9). Thus "linking the Ali Center to downtown redevelopment has let Louisville cover over several sticky issues: its economic strife, its history of racism, and the earlier legacy of urban planning in the downtown area" (p. 19). The Center's "discursive construction of the Ali history elides elements of his past and the city's to articulate ideas of social, economic, and urban 'development'" (p. 3).

- 8 If Hahner is right, Louisville remains a site of polite racism. But this differs from the earlier version, for it now provides a place to celebrate the city's most famous son. He turns out to be black, but only in a way that focuses attention on the individual, advances the city elite's economic development interests, and selectively forgets the actual historical context in which Muhammad Ali learned to fight. It also ignores the actual condition of blacks in present day Louisville, especially in its west end.
- 9 If Gerhardt is right, Cold War Berlin figured (for Louisvillians and other Americans) as a place where, unlike Louisville and other parts of the USA, "American's democratic vision of increasing racial and ethnic equality was always on the verge of being realized" (p. 11). But post-1989 Berlin figures as a place of fear that Berlin's racist past might reemerge. "Contrasting sharply with the 'lost' city of the 1980s," Gerhardt says, "the changed post-wall Berlin emerges as a ghost town dominated by sites that embody the return of racial and ethnic tensions and outright oppression" (p. 23).
- 10 To juxtapose Hahner's story about Louisville with Gerhardt's about Berlin is to provoke a couple of surprising linkages. These shed light on the racialized nature of action in the USA (or at least Louisville) today. As Hahner reveals, the Ali Center is being designed to focus visitors' attention on the values and turning points of Ali's life. It tells a story of personal growth for the individual and respect for shared humanity. As Jerry Abramson, the newly elected mayor of a newly unified Louisville and Jefferson County Metro Government, said at a reception in June 2003, "This building and plaza will come to symbolize many things, including Muhammad Ali's ability to bring people together and create unity and celebrate diversity." "Above all, the Ali Center building will be a welcoming place," says the Ali Center's web site (2004). "From the moment the visitor first sees the structure, he or she will be

welcomed in a warm and embracing manner.”

- 11 Thousands of miles away, in Berlin, though, is another museum in another formerly divided city. Daniel Libeskind’s new Jewish Museum was built inside former West Berlin, just two or three blocks from the Berlin Wall. Much like the new Ali Center in Louisville, it concerns people who have not always been met in a “warm and embracing manner.” Strikingly unlike the Ali Center, however, it focuses not on an individual but on an entire group. Reflecting a brilliant application of “deconstructive” design principles, Libeskind’s museum seeks to help Berliners come to terms with their problematic past, and do so in a way that enables the diverse people of a rapidly changing Berlin to thrive.
- 12 As architectural historian Peter Chametsky (2001) puts it, Libeskind wanted to design a building that would open up the unidirectional narrative of Berlin’s past to other perspectives. It would embody a matrix of connections associating past and present, absence and presence, especially by extending the building directionally toward locations associated with the 200,000 or so Berlin Jews murdered or driven into exile by the Nazis. The resulting building narrates, through architectural design, an intellectually and emotionally challenging story about the movement of Jewish people into and out of Berlin. It tells of the massive loss of German Jewish culture. It also registers the loss to German culture in general that the Holocaust produced. In Libeskind’s own words, the task of designing and building the new Jewish Museum in Berlin “in all its ethical depth requires the incorporation of the void of Berlin back into itself, in order to disclose how the past continues to affect the present and to reveal how a hopeful horizon can be opened through the aporias of time” (quoted in Schneider 1999, p. 19).
- 13 The recent history of African-Americans in Louisville contains no void equivalent to the Holocaust. Yet it does reveal how “the past continues to affect the present.” Hence the act of designing the new Ali Center opens up the possibility of a “hopeful horizon.” Still the Center’s designers have not taken up the challenge of showing how the past continues to affect the present in Louisville. If they had, visitors to the Center could learn about the legacy of “polite racism” in Louisville, the transformation of race relations in the city, and the challenges that remain.
- 14 Visitors could learn that, in some important ways, Louisville is like Berlin. In both places, people are being urged to forget old

boundaries and divisions. In contexts of economies that are highly competitive and global, both are being encouraged to respond to challenges of reunification by reinventing their local cultures and by becoming truly global cities. As Gerhardt warns us, forgetting old boundaries might just be another way of letting the racist past sneak back. As the past fifteen years in Berlin demonstrate, the collapse of old physical walls does not entail the disappearance of all socio-cultural walls. Rather people in Berlin talk about “the Wall in the head” that still shapes the actions of many residents long after the Wall of concrete was torn down. It may be, too, that many residents of Louisville still act with a “wall” in their heads (see Throgmorton, 2004b).

- 15 If Gerhardt and Hahner are right, Berlin and Louisville are both showing how race and racism still matter in the USA. Both point to ongoing racialization. The question at the start of this short essay is whether race and racism still matter in the United States. When juxtaposed, the Gerhardt and Hahner essays evoke a subtly different question: how do race and racism matter after the fall of the Wall and the end of the Cold War? Or more specifically, now that Americans no longer concentrate on overcoming the Cold War divide between East and West: how do race and racism figure in the contrast between “freedom loving nations” and “terrorists?”

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