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# “What was left of Berlin looked bleaker every day”: Berlin, Race, and Ethnicity in Recent American Literature

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# “What was left of Berlin looked bleaker every day”

## Berlin, Race, and Ethnicity in Recent American Literature

Christine Gerhardt

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- 1 In America’s cultural imagination, Berlin’s urban landscapes have long assumed a vital position. After World War II, in particular, America’s multifaceted efforts to reshape post-war Germany were written directly onto the body of its former capital, physically linking America’s political visions to Berlin’s built environments. The Airlift Memorial (1951) at Tegel, for example, and a copy of the Liberty Bell sounding from Schöneberg’s city hall inextricably merged the memory of America’s history with Berlin’s public urban places. Later the Marshall Plan’s notion of linking Germany’s ideological re-education with democratic forms of architecture and urban planning gave rise to the American Memorial Library (1954) and the Congress Hall (1957) as most visible signs of West-Berlin’s new American ties.<sup>1</sup> A growing number of American army posts and office buildings, educational and cultural institutions added a somewhat American feel to the daily life in certain Berlin districts. This intricate web of transatlantic references turned Berlin into what many perceived to be Germany’s most “American” city – a quality that not only influenced the way Berliners perceived their own city but also kept parts of *America’s* cultural memory anchored within the built environments of Berlin.<sup>2</sup>
- 2 The end of the Cold War, symbolized so powerfully by the fall of the Berlin wall, significantly changed the city’s urban spatiality, thereby also altering the landscapes that have long served as important reference points for America’s transatlantic perspectives. While the current reorganization of Berlin’s public spaces to some extent still looks to the U.S. for models, new American projects tend to be part of larger international endeavors which now often focus on East-Berlin, while older American places such as U.S. Army posts, the Amerika Haus, or the Memorial Library are either deserted or being radically restructured. The streets of Berlin, where old and new American places frequently collide with the city’s new cultural and political self-confidence, tell

conflicting stories about America's shifting engagement with the German capital, opening up new spaces for "reading" Berlin from across the Atlantic.<sup>3</sup>

3 In this essay, I argue that literary accounts of the city's particular urban spatiality constitute an important textual strategy for Americans to review their diverse investments in the reunited German capital. Focusing on a selection of three rather different post-Wall texts – Susan Neiman's memoir *Slow Fire: Jewish Notes from Berlin* (1992), Robert Darnton's journalistic account *Berlin Journal, 1989-1990* (1991), and Audre Lorde's poem "East Berlin" – I hope to demonstrate that, in America's literary imagination, Berlin's actual physical landscapes serve as key reference points for how parts of the United States negotiate their own cultural and political convictions in the changed global context after 1989.

4 Positioned as both the most German and the most "American" of all German cities, the reunified Berlin remains a complex and paradoxical cultural space, raising questions that need to be addressed in a both interdisciplinary and transatlantic framework. Contributing to this interdisciplinary inquiry from the perspective of literary studies, my analysis here focuses on how the built environment of Berlin operates as a symbolic force in recent texts from three major generic areas: autobiographical writing, historical non-fiction, and poetry. While the intersections between literature and the city have long interested scholars in the field of American literary and cultural studies, American literary inventions of Berlin add an intercultural dimension to the field which so far has received little attention.<sup>4</sup>

5 In their early, influential collection on *Literature and the American Urban Experience*, Michael C. Jaye and Chalmers Watts pointed out that "novels, plays, and poems . . . have so interfused the experience of reading with the experience of living that they form our understanding of the city: thus they influence what we do with our cities, and how we live and how we want to live in them" (1981, p. ix). More recently, Carlo Rotella has argued that urban literary texts enter into a conversation with the transformations of the built environment at a particular point in time, that they "make imaginative use of the period's urban themes and problems, develop coherent understandings of urban orders or pull apart those understandings, presciently anticipate events and ideas, or turn a selectively blind eye to the material they engage with" (p. 8). Starting from similar assumptions, this essay explores how contemporary American literature imaginatively

interacts with Berlin's physical urban sites, drawing from and shaping their particular themes and conflicts. Methodologically grounded in American Studies and discourse analysis, my interpretation reads the city of Berlin not *as* but *in* texts, and thus makes statements about its symbolic power in an American cultural context. Specifically I base my exploration on an analysis of how the respective American speaking subject or narrator in the texts defines his or her identity as an American in relation to Berlin's urban landscapes. Since I am interested in how Berlin operates as a cultural force in particular texts, this reading is paradigmatic without being representative in a statistical sense.

## I.

- 6 The first notable characteristic of recent American literature about Berlin is that, apart from the growing interest in the newly reunited city, a surprisingly large number of texts continue to imaginatively engage with earlier moments in the history of Berlin. Fifteen years after the fall of the Wall, memoirs, story collections, and novels that remember Berlin as a divided city of Cold War confrontation<sup>5</sup> or go even farther back and review Berlin's involvement in World War II military operations and Nazi crimes<sup>6</sup> still constitute a major part of America's current perspectives on Berlin. My textual selection takes account of this constellation by beginning with a discussion of Susan Neiman's *Slow Fire: Jewish Notes from Berlin*, a memoir that focuses almost entirely on the city's Cold War past framed by critical references to the radically different Berlin the narrator encountered after 1989. Neiman's *Slow Fire* is a not only a particularly illuminating example for America's continued interest in Cold War Berlin, it also anticipates what characterizes recent American texts about the new Berlin – the symbolic power of a city whose physical landscapes have been shaped by a history of racial oppression and by anxious attempts to overcome this troublesome past that keeps resurfacing in the present.
- 7 Told from an overtly political and highly critical perspective of a young Jewish-American philosopher, the narrative offers a roughly chronological account of the author's six-year stay in Berlin during the 1980s. Yet from very early on, the text is primarily structured around Neiman's repeated encounters with Berlin's omnipresent, both latent and open anti-Semitism, so much so that the city appears as a place permeated with physical manifestations of xenophobia. Neiman keeps encountering sites that embody Berlin's Nazi past and therefore won't quite blend in with the city's

relaxed everyday present life: the “ridiculous signpost” at Wittenbergplatz, designed to commemorate concentration camps as “places of horror, which we never dare forget” but strangely situated at a busy intersection where people see it on their way “to get photocopies or lobsters or new shoes” (p. 15); the exhibition “Synagogues in Berlin: Destroyed Architecture” which commemorates the Jewish life that has been erased from a city whose few remaining synagogues have been turned into memorial sites rather than active places of worship; or the sign at the *S-Bahn* station Berlin-Wannsee, which is printed in the Gothic script used in the 1930s and '40s and carries the memory of the Potsdam conference which decided on the Nazis' so-called “final solution.” Having come to Berlin in order to explore precisely this painful chapter in German-Jewish history right where it took place, Neiman uneasily registers the sheer number of sites that provide physical links to that history – “places of horror” that ultimately make it impossible for her to permanently stay in Berlin.

- 8 Yet as the narrator relates how she tries to find an apartment, how she connects to the local Jewish community, falls in love, founds a family, and finally moves back to the U.S. in 1988 because “a Jew can't live here without going crazy” (p. 286), her story also tells of a continued fascination with this city's urban landscapes. The fascination persists in spite of her fears, doubts, and massive frustrations in the face of Berlin's oppressive history; and it hinges on the numerous open, unfinished locations where Berlin tries to cope creatively with its multiple, ruptured pasts. In Neiman's favorite Turkish market in Kreuzberg, she chats with neighbors and watches different ethnic groups interact; at Potsdamer Platz, which back then still was a huge dump, “a bombed-out lot . . . heaped high with every imaginable kind of object” (p. 135), she enjoys rummaging through miscellaneous remnants of the past; and from the perspective of her three-year old son, she ponders how Berliners have creatively turned inner-city neighborhoods, “where every vacant lot may call up the bombings” (p. 299), into an assemblage of playgrounds. Interestingly Neiman connects these vacant spaces to America's complicated involvement in the city's history. As she remarks ironically that “This was, in its way, a gift of the Allies, for the playgrounds were built in the spaces where the bombs had left nothing but ruins” (p. 236), she reads them both as (American) “battlegrounds” in the struggle against fascist tyranny and as sites where Berliners have created places of hope and rebirth, balancing, at least to a degree, the city's unsolved legacies of anti-Semitism and oppression.

- 9 The site that forms the prime locus of Neiman's narrative about Berlin's unique urban geography, however, is the *Kneipe*, Berlin's typical neighborhood pub. In *Slow Fire*, the *Kneipen* are the points where the unsettling presences of Berlin's anti-Semitic history and the possibility to face this past and deal with it dialogically converge. First there are *Kneipen* "where old Nazis gather to celebrate Hitler's birthday" (p. 14). Later the narrator visits an old SS- *Kneipe* which offers an eerie aura of historicity since most people seem to be oblivious of the place's past: "The small room with jagged walls was all that the bombs left of a large building. The former garden looking out to the Winterfeldplatz [sic] was full of rubble. People sat there, nevertheless, on hot nights" (p. 77). Even the numerous typical, seemingly apolitical *Kneipen* for Neiman carry the burden of the city's troubling past, since they are marred by legacies of mistrust towards strangers and difference: "There are hundreds of kneipen that looked like it, dozens with an identical name. Bauernstübl contained a jukebox, a pinball machine and two round tables covered with flowered cloth. Conversation stopped when a stranger entered the room and the mood was threatening, sometimes openly so, if he tried to take a place at the bar which belonged to one of the regulars" (p. 200). In this text, the typical Berlin *Kneipe* is unwelcoming to outsiders, a place where people giggle, "Look at that tar paper!" (p. 200) when three young Africans enter, a cultural institution that embodies Berlin's past and present xenophobia in the worst possible sense.
- 10 Yet paradoxically, the *Kneipe* it is also the place where the American visitor gets in touch with Berlin and Berliners, where she slowly begins to feel at home. Kreuzberg's Bauernstübl even becomes her favorite pub, her "Stammkneipe": "I had seen at once that this was a place where I could let go. Who came to Bauernstübl? It was a neighborhood kneipe, and except for an occasional actor or a lonely schizophrenic, we were the only customers without working-class origins. The price of the humanity we found there was a great deal of beer" (p. 200). Even though Neiman has to face the single most aggressive outburst of German anti-Semitism in Bauernstübl, it is her preferred Berlin site, a place "where everything was in the open" so "you knew what you were up against" (p. 200). Berlin's *Kneipen* in *Slow Fire*, then, are places where diverse historical legacies are addressed and negotiated: unique urban sites that not only amplify but also help to articulate experiences of racial and ethnic difference. In a city where layers upon layers of built environments create a bewildering tension between sites that carry oppressive memories

and those whose state of flux embodies a perennial hope for new beginnings, the unspectacular *Kneipen* emerge as focal points of dialogue and perhaps even understanding – as down to earth, actual places where Jewish-Americans can begin to feel at home in spite of overwhelming frustration with the city’s failure to cope with its legacies of racist prejudice and intolerance.

- 11 Published during the cultural and political upheavals that followed the fall of the Wall, this memoir recreates the 1980s Berlin as a site of reluctant American hope for cross-racial and ethnic understanding which persisted in the face of considerable adversaries. Yet it is important to note that Neiman distinguishes sharply between this Cold War Berlin and the newly reunited German capital. In her introduction, she explains that her stories “end, where they must, with the collapse of the Wall,” predicting that “The Berlin of the future will look rather different” (p. ix). The end of her memoir offers a brief, pessimistic glimpse at the post-Wall city, suggesting that the recent changes have not been for the better: “For months friends wrote to say we’d left just in time. What was left of Berlin looked bleaker every day. The neo-Nazi Republican Party had garnered enough votes to command a voice in the government. Edgar’s new novel had won a major prize; swastikas were chiseled into the bookstore doorway the morning after he read from it” (p. 288). This contrast emphasizes even more what the narrator’s experiences have suggested throughout this memoir – that for Jewish-Americans like Neiman, only the *old* Berlin was an exceptional, almost mythical place whose complex and contradictory urban landscapes inspired hope in spite of the many physical connection to Germany’s anti-Semitic past. The reunified Berlin of the 1990s by contrast invites skepticism and fear that the city’s racist past might reemerge, manifesting itself in streets and public places that had come to signify reluctant hope. Read in the context of Europe’s shifting political realities, whose effects on the global position of the U.S. were difficult to predict, Neiman’s nostalgic memoir ultimately suggests a continued transatlantic longing for a Cold War Berlin where America’s democratic vision of increasing racial and ethnic equality was always on the verge of being realized.

## II.

- 12 While Suzanne Neiman and other contemporary American writers continue to publish narrative evocations of Berlin before the fall of the Wall, a growing number of texts venture to explore the

unfamiliar territory of the new, post-1989 Berlin. Irene Dische's short story collection, *Strange Traffic* (1995), for example, focuses on Berlin's many American visitors and new Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, even though she, too, links them to memories of Berlin during the Holocaust. Similarly J. S. Marcus's *The Captain's Fire* (1996) tells the story of a Jewish American who stays in (East) Berlin after the fall of the Wall and becomes obsessed with its new waves of xenophobia. And Just Ward's most recent novel, *The Weather in Berlin* (2002), blurs the experiences of an aging American movie director in the streets and cafés of the reunified city with detailed reflections about Germany's past. One of these texts is Robert Darnton's *Berlin Journal, 1989-1990*. It is a mostly journalistic account of the dramatic social and political changes that followed the fall of the Wall. What makes this book interesting for an analysis of Berlin's shifting significance in American texts is that Darnton's powerful narrative voice provides particularly vivid accounts of the city's unique urbanity. And even though Darnton approaches Berlin from a very different perspective than Neiman, he too links the city's changing geographies to its past and present involvement with racial and ethnic discrimination, revealing a certain pattern in current American perspectives on Berlin that cuts across generic differences.

- 13 Darnton, a Princeton professor of European history specializing in the French Revolution, happened to be in Berlin in September 1989 and decided to stay for an entire year to follow Europe's most recent "revolution" as closely as possible. In his book, he tries "to combine a record of what happened with reports on how people understood the happenings" and "to keep an eye on the symbolic significance of their actions" (1991, pp. 12-13), mixing "event history" that strives for objectivity, reflections on Germany's "mental geography," and decidedly subjective personal narratives into a curious hybrid genre. Before he even starts his report on his travels through West and East Germany and especially through Berlin as the journal's narrative center, he situates his *Journal* squarely in the historical and political contexts of anti-Semitism and xenophobia by way of two very different prefaces. "Confessions of a Germanophobe" is a piece of family history about his father who was killed fighting the Nazis, a short piece that inextricably links Darnton's explorations of contemporary Germany to the memory of World War II. "A Wandering Jew" introduces the reader to Isaak Behar, who survived the holocaust hiding in the middle of Berlin and now visits the city's schools to speak about his life. Neither story relates directly to the events



that make up the rest of the book; yet by framing his *Berlin Journal* with memories of Germany's Nazi past, Darnton sets them up as crucial reference points against which he is going to read the new Berlin .

- 14 Among the new capital's sites that Darnton explores in greater detail, the *Kneipen*, which also form the geographical and cultural center of Neiman's cold-war Berlin, again take a key position. Six months after the fall of the Wall, their role in East Berlin's district Prenzlauer Berg has changed considerably and, from Darnton's perspective, not for the better. Wondering what it is "that makes the pubs in East Berlin seem changed," Darnton muses:

when I returned to Prenzlauer Berg, it was possible to see the first glimmer of Westernization in the way they downed their beer. The Budike on Husemanstrasse [sic] offered draft Dortmunder with "Dandysnack," American-style fast food, in place of curried sausage and *Boulette*. Farther down the street, the 1990 [sic] had turned itself into a hangout for West-Berlin yuppies, who spent West German marks for West German beer in a fake Gay Nineties setting saturated with Western pop music. . . . On the other side of the Kollwitzplatz, the Westphal offered hard rock and political punk that might have come out of London (p. 145).

- 15 Mourning the transformation from local East Berlin neighborhood *Kneipen* into undistinguished "Western" hangouts, the American speaker perceives recent changes not only as a loss of atmosphere and authenticity. There is also a subtle link to the theme of how racial and ethnic differences are negotiated in Berlin's public places. In December 1989, immediately after the fall of the Wall, Darnton still cherished Eastern *Kneipen* as "tiny spots of warmth and light in an cold and dismal world . . . neighborhood clubs, where the regulars all know one another and their beer arrives before they have to order it" (p. 139). These places strongly resemble the pubs in Neiman's old Berlin just across the Wall, especially since Darnton also finds Berlin's old *Kneipen* to be anything but inviting to most foreigners: "There are a great many workers from Vietnam, North Korea, Mozambique, and Angola in East Germany, but . . . they never come to pubs like this one" (pp. 140-41). Nevertheless they were places where people discussed politics: "Before the *Wende*, drinkers were not permitted to stand

more than one row deep at bars. But at the Fengler, they stood five rows deep and talked politics” (p. 143). Now this sense of distinction has been sacrificed in a rapid process of gentrification. Recent efforts to reconstruct Berlin’s inner city neighborhoods, designed to accommodate middle-class residents and visitors, may have improved the services, and certainly more people from diverse cultural backgrounds now come to meet and interact in these places. Yet to Darnton, Berlin’s *Kneipen* have lost both their local specificity and their political significance.

- 16 As Darnton moves through Berlin with its rapidly changing Eastern parts, he frequently calls the readers’ attention to places that – just like the *Kneipen* – were once interesting and relevant, strange but also inviting. But in 1990, the city has become repellent, sometimes outright offensive; it is overwhelmingly ugly, and even sick:

The pavement itself lay in broken slabs that looked like the discarded remains of another era, the turn of the century, when the Prenzlauer Berg was lined with imposing facades and well-appointed sidewalks. Now the buildings seemed to suffer from leprosy. Balconies, friezes, stucco work of all variety had dropped off, and you could see the ends of steel beams sticking through the outer walls. The deterioration had been as bad in December, but it was far less visible then. The cruel light of the setting sun in May exposed every detail of the neighborhoods pathology (p. 144).

Six months after the fall of the Wall, the bright light of Spring does not, as one might expect, suggest optimism and orientation toward the future. For Darnton, the May sun does not start to “revitalize” the city but brings out its dilapidation all the more clearly. Contradicting the common notion that Spring brings renewal and fresh energy, this passage’s detailed account of a run-down East Berlin district produces a sense of hopelessness, melancholy, and loss that permeates the entire *Journal*. And even though passages like this one do not carry any explicit racial or ethnic connotations, as they do in Neiman’s text, Darnton’s two prefaces nevertheless turn such bleak descriptions of Berlin’s dreary landscapes into symbolic tales of the city’s multiple, oppressive pasts and their shadowy, vaguely dangerous presence in the late twentieth century.

17 The fact that Darnton focuses on the Eastern parts of town also emphasizes that East Berlin, too, matters in the contemporary American imagination, albeit in a complex and contradictory way. On the one hand, the fall of the Wall seems to have done away with the former distinction between “America’s” West Berlin and a vastly different East Berlin, since Darnton views the East as a space that for all its differences shared a general Berlin atmosphere that is now about to be lost. Yet on the other hand, Darnton’s focus on the Eastern part, with its ubiquitous sense of decay and its vaguely dangerous atmosphere, also suggests that the city’s troublesome past which he mentioned in his prefaces might be more of an issues in East Berlin. Paradoxically his expression of regret for Berlin’s changing urban appearance also mourns the loss of Berlin as a divided city with a socialist East – even though, and perhaps because, America’s attention had been focused for half a century on overcoming precisely this division.

### **III.**

18 Another text that testifies to the uneasiness and skepticism with which recent American texts look toward Berlin’s changing urbanity after the fall of the Wall is Audre Lorde’s poem “East Berlin.” Lorde, the well-known black lesbian feminist writer and activist whose poetry has also been noted for its commitment to urban environments (Wallace 1999), came to West Berlin in 1984. She taught as a guest-professor at the Free University, and helped to forge an Afro-German women’s network. After 1989, she kept returning to both parts of the city. Her poem “East Berlin” sheds an extremely critical light on Berlin’s most recent transformations: To her, the city has changed from a cosmopolitan island of hope into a reunited German capital whose public places, in particular, have become zones of danger for anybody who bears the mark of racial difference. As the title suggests, the poem takes this danger to be most threatening in the Eastern half of the city, radicalizing Neiman’s and especially Darnton’s subtle or indirect sense of apprehension. As poetry, with its suggestive use of rhythm, figurative language, and visual imagery, Lorde’s text provides a decidedly subjective view of Berlin that is not necessarily committed to actual historical developments as a memoir or a journalistic account would be. Nevertheless the view she expresses in “East Berlin” has much in common with Neiman’s and Darnton’s perspectives, underscoring a common American concern for the new Berlin’s struggle with an omnipresent, troubling past.

- 19 Lorde's poem draws two lines of difference in the map of the freshly reunited Berlin, lines that register and transform the major fields of tension in which American literature about Berlin has operated since 1989. The first, temporal axis separates the old, Cold War Berlin from the new:

It feels dangerous now  
to be Black in Berlin  
sad suicides that never got reported  
Neukölln Kreuzberg the neon Zoo  
a new siege along Unter den Linden  
with Paris accents New York hustle  
many tattered visions intersecting.

The opening distinction between the "now" and an unspecified time before recurs throughout the poem, as each of the three stanzas contrasts specific moments of present fear with indirect allusions to a one-time Berlin where hope still was possible. Lorde's acute sense of danger further distinguishes the earlier, legendary Berlin from the present, in a way that supersedes the sense of difference that emerged from Neiman's uneasy apprehension and Darnton's vision of decay and loss.

- 20 The second axis of difference in the poem about the New Berlin is spatial. The title immediately directs the attention to eastern Berlin. After the poem briefly wanders through the western parts of Neukölln and Kreuzberg and passes the Zoo station, it locates the center of the new, dangerous Berlin "on the other side":

Already my blood shrieks  
through East Berlin streets  
misplaced hatreds  
volcanic tallies rung upon cement  
Afro-German woman stomped to death  
by skinheads in Alexanderplatz  
two-year-old girls  
half-cooked in their camp cots  
who pays the price  
for their disillusion?

The poem's specific East Berlin places are highly symbolical sites – Berlin's historical alley Unter den Linden and Alexanderplatz, the central square of the former capital of the G.D.R. – as well as ordinary streets. They suggest that the entire East Berlin, its

center as well as its margins, partakes in creating a city of aggression towards racial and ethnic otherness, further distinguishing it from the western half.

- 21 For Lorde, East Berlin's public places, in particular, have turned into sites of massive racial violence. The streets, far from Robert Darnton's scenes of change and decay that incite a sense of loss and nostalgia, are faceless sites of horror that provide no shelter. The speaker's shrieks also evoke the noise of East Berlin's streetcars and especially the *S-Bahn* – public spaces of fear that have come to span the city with a terrifying web of Nazi attacks rather than connecting its long separated parts. Not some dim side street or unlit corner but Alexanderplatz, the wide, open space in the heart of the Eastern city, adjacent to Germany's old and new parliament and government buildings, becomes the scene of the most drastic incidence of racist violence. The "sad suicides" at the poem's beginning may have occurred in West Berlin, yet their dreadful silence is now surpassed by the horror in the inner city landscapes of the East. Compared to one of Lorde's earlier poems – "Berlin is Hard on Colored Girls," about the difficulties of finding a black woman's love in the streets of West Berlin – the later poem "East Berlin" no longer balances discomfort and worry with tenderness and a vision of love. Lorde leaves no doubt that Berlin as a whole has stopped being a place that black Americans would be able to feel comfortable in. Unlike Susan Neiman, who registers uneasiness regarding the new Berlin, Lorde expresses outright fear in light of this city's re-emerging racial and ethnic violence.
- 22 In the early 1990s, the black American poet, who is as aware of the city's legacies and ongoing practices of racial oppression as Neiman and Darnton, finds a city whose public places have given way to the shadows of the past in a most alarming way. In this sense, she clearly confirms Susan Neiman's explicit nervousness concerning the new, reunited Berlin; while Lorde's emphasis on the eastern half of the city attests to a fresh American interest in both parts of Berlin that is also evident in Darnton's *Berlin Journal*. As she faces the recent upsurge of Berlin's racism head-on with a clear focus on the East, however, Lorde gives the former capital of the G.D.R. a much more dire prominence. It is interesting to note that in doing so, Lorde echoes current debates within Germany about the East's omnipresent racism, allegedly superseding similar conflicts in the West. Thus her view of Berlin participates in the ongoing stigmatization of an entire cultural region as a place of fear, a stigmatization that in turn stabilizes the cultural identity of West Berlin as island of democracy even after it

has lost its special status as a unique outpost of American dreams.

- 23 In post-1989 American literature about Berlin, then, the city's urban environments, ranging from Potsdamer Platz to Alexanderplatz, from neighborhood pubs to playgrounds, train stations, and construction sites, hold a prominent position. These built landscapes continue to provide an imaginative structure that guides America's multi-layered dialogue with a city that is repositioning itself in a changed European and global context. In particular, Berlin's public places function as a productive reference point for transatlantic reflections about race and ethnicity: The diverse texts by Susan Neiman, Robert Darnton, and Audre Lorde suggest that recent American literature tends to view Berlin from the perspective of visiting outsiders who struggle to reconcile certain American cultural expectations with Berlin's urban realities, centering issues of racial and ethnic difference as they are materialized in the city's built environments. Interestingly all of the three texts directly or indirectly compare the new German capital to the Berlin of the Cold War era, which is remembered as a place where hope and a sense of belonging could persist in spite of conflicts and unresolved historical legacies. Contrasting sharply with the "lost" city of the 1980s, the changed, post-wall Berlin emerges as a ghost town dominated by sites that embody the return of racial and ethnic tension and outright oppression.
- 24 This view of the new Berlin as a space where Germany's multiple histories of racial conflict and oppression converge 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. Yet in a complex, paradoxical way, such a perspective also links the changed Berlin to parts of America's dominant cultural self. As the texts by Neiman, Darnton, and Lorde try to negotiate their yearning for the old Berlin and a growing uneasiness about the new capital, they subtly intertwine reflections about race in Germany, in German-American relations, and, albeit more indirectly, in the United States itself. If race relations are one of the prime indicators of progress toward democracy, as these texts suggest, the works by Neiman, Darnton, and Lorde can 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.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Peter Krieger's essay, "The Americanization of West German Architecture," available online at [www.ghi-dc.org/conpotweb/westernpapers/krieger.pdf](http://www.ghi-dc.org/conpotweb/westernpapers/krieger.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> I am referring here to Andreas Daum's innovative analysis of how Berlin's history matters to America's sense of cultural self. Daum argues that, "in the perception and the rationale of parts of American society Berlin embodied a bundle of qualities which made the city a place that mirrored important historical myths and political visions of the United States" (2000, p. 50). According to Daum, the Berlin Blockade, the Airlift, and the rise and fall of the



Berlin Wall have become part of America's cultural memory, helping to sustain the sense of a uniquely American national identity that is continuously forged at the "frontier," and strengthening "American" character traits such as idealism, courage, and unlimited optimism (pp. 51-60). Even though Daum focuses on major historical events that shaped America's relationship to Berlin rather than on their concrete physical manifestations in the actual landscape of this city, his analysis indirectly hints at the significance of Berlin's unique urban spatiality for the ways in which American's have related to it.

**3** For the discussion of Berlin's urban landscapes as American-German intertext in the Berlin press, see for instance the city journal *Scheinschlag* (05/2001), where architectural sociologist Werner Sewig discusses New Urbanism as an American influence on Berlin, reading the rebuilding of Potsdamer Platz, the Adlon Hotel or the Tacheles as American theme parks. See also the highly critical review concerning the plans to restructure the once-alternative culture center Tacheles as the first new urbanism project in Berlin under Duany Plater-Zyberk, published in the *tageszeitung* (March 3, 2001). The 1999 debates about the new US embassy were also directly connected to Berlin's position as German *and* American city and the ways in which this identity is currently being renegotiated. An article in the German newspaper *tageszeitung* puts it like this: "The argument between the US and Berlin is not about diplomats' security. It is about the space that Americans want to take up in the former front city. Sure, Berliners are grateful to the allies for their services in the once divided city. But Berlin is a narrow city, and on top of that, an old one. Its streets were built for carriages, not for Cadillacs. . . . Frontiers in Berlin are no longer made with pegs" (Fusco 1999, p. 19).

**4** Most analyses on the city and literature focus on representations of cities within their own national literatures, i.e., American cities in American literature and Berlin in German literature. Compare, for example, the three chapters in *Berlin in Focus: Cultural Transformations in Germany* (1996), edited by Barbara Becker-Cantarino, which discuss Berlin in pre- and post-Wall fiction by Jurek Becker, Monika Maron, Peter Schneider, Helga Schubert, Verena Stefan, Christa Wolf. Two of the few analyses published on the presence of Berlin in American literature are the essays by the German Americanist Eberhard Brüning, "Berlin – as seen by American writers (1890-1940)," and "Stadtluft macht frei! African-American Writers and Berlin (1892-1932)," in which Brüning traces the changing perception of Berlin

in texts by Mark Twain, W.E.B. DuBois, Claude McKay and Langston Hughes.

**5** Compare Marianna S. Katona's *Tales from the Berlin Wall* (1997), T. Degens's juvenile novel *Freya on the Wall* (1997), or Edith Anderson's autobiography *Love in Exile: An American Writer's Memoir of Life in Divided Berlin* (1999), which focuses on the 1950s and '60s even though the author lived in Berlin until her death in 1999.

**6** Compare Margot Abbott's *The Last Innocent Hour* (1991) and Joseph Kanon's thriller *The Good German* (2001) – two American-German love stories set during and after World War II. Similarly, albeit with a radically different focus, David L. Robbins's *The End of War: A Novel of the Race for Berlin* (2000) and Robert C. Reinhart's *Walk the Night: A Novel of Gays in the Holocaust* (1994) also turn back to the Berlin of the 1940s. And Katie Hafner's 1995 novel *The House at the Bridge* tries to understand Germany by telling the story of a villa near Berlin and the people who lived there from the early nineteenth century to after the fall of the Wall.