H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Karen E. Till. *The New Berlin: Memory, Politics, Place.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005. 279 S. $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8166-4011-9.

Reviewed by Natan Sznaider (The Academic College of Tel-Aviv-Yaffo, Israel)

Published on H-German (March, 2006)

How to Remember the Future: The Memory of Berlin

Anyone who claims that geography cannot be combined with poetry should take a look at Karen Till's beautifully written book on Berlin. She uses a very unique approach to move around places and time, talking to people trying to make sense of the past, using space as something which comes alive in this book. The approach is called "geo-ethnography" which "draws from qualitative and feminist traditions in ethnography and from critical and humanistic traditions in geography" (p. 11). But, instead of such a statement being a turn-off and mostly an invitation to some private incomprehensible journey through postmodern landscapes, this book is a crystal clear tour de force description of the New Berlin. It takes the reader through Berlin's construction-sites of memories: the "Gestapo Terrain"; a walk through Berlin-SchÃ¶neberg with public display of signs that note what Jews were allowed or prohibited to do by law and decree; Berlin's Holocaust Memorial; and the concentration camp site of Sachsenhausen. At all these sites, Karen Till surprises the reader with new twists and turns, and a book about memory, politics and space is at the same time a page turner. Interwoven with her account and others' descriptions of the places are carefully constructed theories of globalization and cosmopolitanization. Numerous pictures and drawings help the reader to get a concrete sense of Till's argument.

If some argue that the main reason globalization causes so much anxiety is its dissolution of the coordinates we have been using to make sense of experience, Till demonstrates how making sense of place and geographical coordinates helps us to reduce complexities about the past and the future. But these are not only abstract claims. Till follows citizen initiatives and how people working and living in Berlin make sense of things. Thus, we are introduced to the "The Active Museum" and its archeological approach to memory. We get a glimpse at grassroots politics, coalitions and associations and how an "active museum" is actually created on the ground–and this in the most direct sense of the term, since its members staged a "let's dig" day. This event commemorated the past on the site of the former Gestapo terrain and in 1985 people made a symbolic dig to uncover the past. This example is one of Till's most illustrative, showing how the past is being uncovered and where geography and the study of memory can produc-

tively work together. Anyone who feels that globalization homogenizes should look at this book in order to see that it does not. It shows us that individuals are not set adrift, that they have bonds, anchors and values and that part of the new global age is the attachment to place. Till's book is, therefore, also a fascinating study of the changing modes of temporality and memory mediated by space.

As Till shows, cosmopolitanism does not exist without local particularities, and it does not exist without digging deeply into local sites. Till analyzes the so-called open wound, as the Gestapo Terrain in Berlin was called. It was a gash in the body politics of the city. When looking at the pictures of the "Topography of Terror," the reader at once grasps what Till means. There is nothing designed about the excavated ruins of Gestapo prison cells in the midst of the city terrain. The site involves no postmodern theorizing as with Daniel Libeskind's JÃ¼disches Museum, no endless wondering about the aesthetics of the Holocaust when it comes to the field of stelae at the memorial site constructed by Peter Eisenman. Here the view is plain, not mediated by architectural theory (which is usually a closed book for most readers and spectators); here the "open wound" of the Gestapo terrain lays open (again in the clearest sense of the term) the traumas of the past. Here, Till interweaves Freud's theories of trauma without having to explain too much.

Usually anthropologists do not show their fieldnotes to their readers. They are the secret of the trade; the reader is usually offered the interpretation of those notes. I assume that in most cases, we are spared embarrassment. This is by far not the case here. The intermeshed fieldnotes add another dimension to the book. The author lets us in on her thought process, how she reached the conclusion that she reached, a decision that definitely enriches the book. As to the "Topography of Terror," we learn that Till felt less hypnotized by the new outdoor exhibition, which provides a more analytical and distanced tone. Clearly, Till prefers unmediated drama for experiencing the past and those who know their way around Berlin's institutionalized memory sites can empathize with this view. How much pedagogy can a person bear on a visit to a city?

In this connection, Till analyzes the low-tech and non-manipulative approach at the "Topography of Terror," entering charged debates about the representation of the Holocaust. She recognizes very well the German Left's hostility to popular culture–a hostility based on the Frankfurt's School approach to the cultural industry. Especially when it comes to the Holocaust, mass culture is vilified as a destructive force against reason, as a totalitarian project aimed at destroying autonomous, non-instrumentalized thought.[1] Till is not tempted by such elitist approaches and is rather critical of the site's claims to objectivity and rationality. She does not claim a postmodern arbitrariness, but is aware of the pitfalls of the privileging of a scientist and structural history approach. But there are alternatives. Till takes us to Berlin-SchÃ¶neberg, where an artistic memory project was erected in 1994. This site consists of signs that look like friendly advertisements. A closer look takes away the friendliness. On one side, we find pictures (like a loaf of bread) and on the other side, the sign says: "Jews in Berlin are only allowed to buy food between four and five 'clock in the afternoon. July 4, 1940." Signs like this all over the neighborhood connect the daily spaces of its residents with what happened more than fifty years earlier. And, as Till rightly recognizes, this kind of memorial challenges German traditions of representations. It uses popular images, and it connects the Holocaust to consumption. This memorial shows how so-called mass products can stir up emotion and can make a larger audience sympathize with the suffering of others. Till contrasts this effort very well with the official German cult of atonement.

All these things come together in the chapter on the Holocaust Memorial, called "Aestheticizing the Rupture." As in the other chapters, Till combines theory and praxis in a tightly written chapter. Like others before her, she notes how Germans have built a memorial for the Holocaust that marginalizes and even excludes the Jews. Again, we are taken on a fascinating tour of aesthetics, representation, group activism and local politics all drawn together in an exciting read. In the end, the horizon is universal: Western categories of good and evil mix with Christian discourses of suffering, repentance and redemption. This strategy, of course, attempts to relativize the guilt of the Nazis by asserting that their actions were comparable to similar regimes. Thus we see how–depending on the particular political-cultural and geo-political context–Holocaust representations become a source for both cosmopolitan and particular national outlooks. Every decontextualization involves also a recontextualization. And this recontextualization is described in the last chapter of the book, which defines the new "Memory District" of Berlin. With this district, which contains the memorial sites of the city, Berlin is turned into a place where national guilt is celebrated

(without consequence) and turned into a tourist attraction. Welcome to the New Europe. "The New Berlin" is a wonderful book for those who want to understand these processes of cosmopolitanization of memory, the constructions of new identities and what we gain as well as the price we pay for them.

Note

[1]. Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider. *Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), p. 134.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-german

Citation: Natan Sznaider. Review of Till, Karen E., *The New Berlin: Memory, Politics, Place.* H-German, H-Net Reviews. March, 2006.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11540

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.