HISTORY OF COMMUNISM IN EUROPE 5 (2014) 54–71

Topographies of Identity and Memory: Berlin's "Ghosts" and *Book of Clouds* by Chloe Aridjis

Barbara Loach
Cedarville University

Abstract: The focus of this study is the city of Berlin as a site of contested spaces and its representations in the novel *Book of Clouds* (2009) by Chloe Aridjis. As a number of recent books on Berlin have indicated, the ongoing efforts to physically re-configure historical sites in the city and construct a new post-unification identity for the capital and the nation has produced dissonance between long-standing national narratives of identity and the challenges presented by new identity narratives. The foundation of cultural identity, social memory, is political, shaped and wielded by those in power. Yet, as Michel de Certeau has posited, such power can be contested at the street level where ruptures can be observed. *Book of Clouds*, the first novel by transnational author Chloe Aridjis, explores the relationship of identity and memory as Tatiana, a young Mexican Jewish woman living in Berlin in the first decade of the twenty-first century, observes and interacts with the city and its inhabitants from an outsider's perspective.

Keywords: Berlin, architecture, transnational literature, post-memory fiction, Chloe Aridjis

There is no place that is not haunted by many different spirits hidden there in silence, spirits one can "invoke" or not. Haunted places are the only ones people can live in …[1]

1. Introduction

Berlin as the embodiment of German national identity has been the subject of countless books, articles, and even films, representing a broad array of

[1] De Certeau 1984: 108.

genres, fictional and non-fictional alike. The focus of this study is the city of Berlin, Germany, as a perpetual site of "contested spaces" and its representations in the novel *Book of Clouds* (2009) by Chloe Aridjis[2]. The protagonist of Aridjis's novel, a young Jewish-Mexican woman living in Berlin in the first decade of the twenty-first century, explores her feelings of attraction, alienation, and ambivalence stemming from her beliefs about, and experiences with, German culture from an outsider's perspective; she eventually emerges with a stronger, less preconditioned sense of self, even as the city in reality continues its own process of redefinition. The underlying framework of the novel explores the nature of memory and memories, both individual and collective, and their ability to interpret and challenge constructed realities.

2. The Social Construction of Space

Historically, the concept of nationhood has been inherently linked to territorial claims – the fight by particular groups of people over a physical space and the right to occupy it. Once occupied, the concept of nationhood is predicated upon one of two organizing principles: civic nationalism, which is built upon consensus with respect to laws and political institutions, or ethnic nationalism, which is constituted by shared cultural notions including language, literature, traditions and sentimental associations[3]. However, as urban planning researcher William J.V. Neill points out, "… while most major Western nation states now define their nationhood more in terms of a common citizenship than by common ethnicity, one prominent exception, until recently, has been Germany"[4]. Ever since the decision was made to relocate united Germany's capital back in Berlin, that city has once again become "a locale for the reassessment of the meaning of German nationhood and identity"[5].

A primary indication of this struggle to define German identity and nationhood is embodied in the debate over new and existing buildings in the capital. The debate over the symbolism of buildings is associated with a phenomenon that, in recent years, anthropologists and geographers have also begun to acknowledge: the active role that physical space itself plays in the formation of individual and national identity. As Margaret Rodman explains, rather than categorizing physical territory as "…just space, 'the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile' in Foucault's lament"[6], the emphasis

[2] I would like to thank my colleague Dr. Annis M. Shaver for her input on earlier drafts of this article.

[3] Boyer 2009: 10; Neill 2005: 336.

[4] Neill 2005: 336. The 2013 demographic statistics showed that the population was German 91.5%, Turkish 2.4%, other 6.1% (made up largely of Greek, Italian, Polish, Russian, Serbo-Croatian, and Spanish nationalities) ("Germany Demographics Profile 2013").

[5] Neill 2005: 336.

[6] Rodman 2003: 204.

has shifted to understanding places as socially constructed: "The physical, emotional, and experiential realities places hold for their inhabitants at particular times need to be understood apart from their creation as the [mere] locales of ethnography"[7]. The social construction of a place is the product of the shared and/or contested discourses generated by its inhabitants at both the personal and collective level. In other words, every individual has his/her own personal experience and associations with a particular place which may or may not be shared with other inhabitants or correspond with a particular nationalistic narrative[8].

The dynamics of social construction of a place can be seen in the world today as competing discourses attempt to co-exist or dominate segments of a particular landscape both literally and conceptually. As such, these contested spaces comprise "geographic locations where conflicts in the form of opposition, confrontation, subversion, and/or resistance engage actors whose social positions are defined by differential control of resources and access to power"[9]. The goal of the dominant groups is to impose their views to such an extent that they "…appear to transcend their social production to constitute the 'common sense' of 'average' citizens"[10]. That is to say, the image projected becomes so pervasive as to become accepted as the uncontested norm.

The city of Berlin, Germany, with its long and turbulent history, continues to be characterized by these tensions as it seeks to redefine both itself and the German nation in the twenty-first century. Over its more than seven hundred year history, the city of Berlin has been constructed and re-configured to reflect the mindsets and aspirations of its rulers. Each regime has literally left its mark on the physical landscape of the city. The most recent phase of reconstruction began shortly after the re-unification of West and East Germany and the relocation of the German capital to Berlin in 1990. But not only do contemporary Berlin and Germany face the challenge of re-defining themselves in light of the "historical burden" of the events of World War II, the Soviet occupation, and the national reunification; additional challenges are also presented by the ongoing issues of immigration, the open borders of the European Union, and the resulting multiplicity of symbols and voices that compete for shared recognition and power.

[7] Rodman 2003: 205. The notions of "space" and "place" as defined by contemporary ethnographers and geographers have specific connotations: in general, "space" refers to localities and their positions on maps and plans, while "place" refers to meaningful localities constituted through human practice (Gray 2003: 240).

[8] Rodman 2003: 208.

[9] Low & Lawrence-Zuñiga 2003: 18.

[10] McDonogh 2003: 264.

3. Berlin, Germany: A City Still Divided

According to one official Berlin tourism website, Berlin International, the capital is a cosmopolitan city that has turned the corner regarding its past. The website describes the city as "an exciting city of contrasts," "one of the world's prime locations for first-rate historical art collections," with a "vibrant cultural scene [that] has a lot to offer" (Berlin International). Also according to this website:

> The city has no definite centre and pockets of attractions are dotted all over. The densest array of sights lies to the east of the Brandenburg Gate, on either side of Unter den Linden. West Berlin's centre has less to offer. Nevertheless, visitors should take a look at the broken shard of a church, the Kaiser Wilhelm Gedächtniskirche, which serves as a brutal reminder of World War II. The nearby Zoo and Aquarium also provide *a happy distraction*[11].

Indeed, because of Berlin's appeal as a city with a turbulent history and a divided past, but also with a contemporary "vibe" that attracts young people from all over the world, tourism has become one of the largest sources of income for the city—so much so that some residents now resent the disruption and displacement caused by an estimated half million tourists in their midst on any given day[12]. Others have expressed the concern that, in the push by authorities to market Berlin to tourists, "...Berlin [is] in danger of becoming a Cold War theme park…[that would] turn the city into a 'Disneyland' version of its former self"[13].

Yet, for many of its inhabitants, the reminders of Berlin's traumatic history continue to haunt the present. In contrast to the glamorized travelogue discourse, a more extensive investigation of its history reveals how profoundly it has been shaped by political and religious turmoil, the horrors of war, and domination by foreign powers, with devastating epochs counter-balanced by seasons of economic prosperity, cultural freedom and social tolerance. And even now, some twenty-five years after its reunification and the collapse of the Soviet Union, attempts to deal with vestiges of past conflicts continue to offer competing discourses for its inhabitants and visitors[14]. These competing discourses confront Berliners literally on every street corner in the form of architectural statements made by previous and current authorities desirous of controlling the city's public image. Reminders of the past, whether "ghosts" of the Weimar Republic, the Hitler regime, or Soviet occupation, continue to display their presence throughout the now united sections of old West and

[11] Berlin International, emphasis added.
[12] Novy 2013: 224.
[13] Neill 2005: 342.
[14] Cafferty 2000: 89.

East Berlin. The result is either a sense of affirmation or of alienation and psychological exile experienced by *Wessis* or *Ossis* (as well as by visitors), depending on an individual's particular relationship to his/her physical location in the city[15].

A number of scholars have extensively described the particular dynamics generated by decisions regarding the monuments and public buildings marked by "historical burdens" that remain in Berlin, as well as by those which have already been destroyed and those which have been proposed for future construction[16]. As architect Brian Ladd has noted, "The concentration of troubling memories, physical destruction, and renewal has made Berliners, however reluctantly, international leaders in exploring the links between urban form, historical preservation, and national identity"[17]. The costs of the challenge seem insurmountable, both in terms of physical restoration of the cityscape and in terms of preserving or obliterating the past; deciding whose memories deserve to be preserved and for what purpose continues to produce a sense of "angst" among Berliners. The center of the city represents one such contested space. When the historic Stadtschloss[18] lay in bombed out ruins after the end of World War II, the Communists made the decision to tear the historic palace down rather than try to restore it. The result was "a gaping void at the heart of the old city"[19] that was eventually occupied by the East German Palace of the Republic (Palast der Republik) and punctuated by a 1200-foot high television tower, a construction which dominates the urban landscape and which was intended to showcase "the technological prowess and modernity of the socialist state"[20]. Post-reunification proposals for recovering a vital link to Germany's past by tearing down the Palace of the Republic and reconstructing the Stadtschloss were rejected initially as sentimental, inauthentic and too costly. In 2008, however, the German government did indeed vote to tear down the Palace of the Republic and begin building a new Berlin City Palace, now slated for completion in 2018 or 2019 at an estimated cost of $590 million euros ($700 million dollars)[21].

[15] Cafferty 2000: 93.

[16] For a more detailed discussion of this topic, see works such as Michael Wise's *Capital Dilemma: Germany's Search for a New Architecture of Democracy* (1998); Brian Ladd's *The Ghosts of Berlin: Confronting German History in the Urban Landscape* (1997); and E.J. Gittus, "Berlin as a Conduit for the Creation of German National Identity at the End of the Twentieth Century," *Space & Polity*, 6 (2002): 91-115.

[17] Ladd 1997: 4.

[18] The Stadtschloss, or Berlin City Palace of the Hohenzollern royal family, was commissioned by King Friedrich I in 1701, but dates back to 1442 in its original form as a castle (Ladd 1997: 48-52).

[19] Wise 1998: 43.

[20] Wise 1998: 47.

[21] Itzkoff 2008.

At the heart of the matter – more than just the financial burden that replacing so many buildings would require – lies the inherent issue of German nationalism. As Wise explains, when the West German authorities chose Bonn as their post-war capital, they were very careful to build buildings that were very understated, in direct response to the obsessive nationalism that drove Hitler to commission a complete re-design of Berlin (the future city of "Germania") with mammoth buildings and parade grounds that would instil awe in all who would visit there[22]. With the reunification of the two Germanys and the four sectors of Berlin, even the initial decision to relocate the capital to Berlin was not without objections from those who felt it would lead to a resurgence of the aggressive nationalism that gave rise to Hitler's regime and the war. What to do with a number of the buildings in Berlin that were particularly tainted by "historical burdens" such as the former Reichsbank (designed by Hitler and headquarters of the East German Communist Party) and the Aviation Ministry (headquarters of the Luftwaffe) became an even thornier problem[23]. Also, after reunification, East Berliners were particularly resentful of the intention to destroy any and every structure built under Communist domination simply because it bore the stamp of Soviet occupation. But while some people felt that any reminders of Germany's painful past should be eradicated, others equally insisted that eradicating those reminders would clear the path for future excesses of nationalism once the lessons of the past were forgotten[24].

Perhaps the most contentious issue arose when consideration was given to creating a suitable national monument to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust. The discussion began in 1988 and intensified after the reunification. The appropriate site and configuration of a monument were issues not solely because of the challenges of duly remembering the deaths of millions of victims, both Jews and those of marginalized groups such as homosexuals and gypsies, but also because, "Like all the state architectural projects for the capital, the memorial proved Germany's self-definition and historical understanding were also at stake"[25]. In other words, the type of memorial selected would inescapably communicate to the rest of the world how the German nation truly regarded that period of their history and the value of the lives lost.

The approved design, submitted by U.S. architect Peter Eisenman, was completed in May 2005, on the sixtieth anniversary of the fall of the Nazi regime and the end of World War II[26]. Occupying a space of 19,000 square meters (4.7 acres) near the Brandenburg Gate and just a short distance from the site where Hitler's underground bunker once stood, the Monument to the

[22] Cafferty 2000: 92; Wise 1998: 65, 72.

[23] Wise 1998: 89-92.

[24] Ladd 1997: 1, 11.

[25] Wise 1998: 148-151.

[26] "Holocaust Memorial".

Murdered Jews in Europe (its official name) is made up of 2711 plain grey stone slabs. On top of each slab is a square pillar of random height ranging from a few inches to more than twelve feet high, creating a minimalistic pattern that undulates like waves of grain or the ocean. The paths that are shaped between the slabs undulate as well. The abstract design, which has drawn both praise and criticism, is intended to create a feeling of groundlessness, instability and disorientation because, as Eisenman has said, "The Holocaust is of such magnitude that it cannot be represented without such a representation becoming kitsch, sentimental and hollow"[27]. Eisenman, even though obviously knowing that he would not be able to satisfy everyone, chose not to inscribe any historical references or specific explanation at the site, preferring to leave the final interpretation of the memorial open to the perception of each individual[28].

Thus, although the physical remnants of the Berlin Wall began to disappear in 1989, beginning yet another transformation in the city's profile, Germans continued to struggle with overcoming the sense of "otherness" that had shaped the city's and the nation's psyche especially for those decades that both Berlin and Germany were divided[29]. Ironically, issues of identity were more straight-forward during the Cold War, falling more clearly along ideological lines: both West and East German authorities portrayed the other as "the enemy"[30]. Consequently, with reunification and the invalidation of the "us-them" mind set, Germans have had to struggle with reconciling the events of their past - both the victories and the defeats - by crafting a new and positive sense of nationalism while at the same time fostering and projecting a sense of tolerance toward, and acceptance of, the minorities residing within their borders. As producers of official discourse, both the tourism industry and the local and national governmental authorities - the latter described by E.J. Gittus as Berlin's "élites," including planners, architects, developers and land owners - attempt to control the external perceptions of Berlin and the nation by the physical artifacts they produce[31]. They function as the agents of collective memory and employ the buildings and other structures as their instruments for remembering[32].

[27] Danto 2005: 43.

[28] Danto 2005: 44. However, in spite of Eisenman's objections, a "Center of Information" was created and placed at the site of the memorial to inform visitors about the particulars of the monument and its significance (Danto 2005: 44).

[29] Ladd 1997: 31.

[30] *Ibid*.

[31] Gittus 2002: 112.

[32] Wertsch 2009: 119.

4. Transcultural Literature: The Outsider's View

In his book, *Literature of the Global Age* (2011), author Maurizio Ascari discusses the impact of globalization on both authors and works as the traditional notion of nationalism is being overshadowed by the reality of transnationalism. With advances in technology, communications, transportation, global economics, and the constantly shifting patterns of migration, the physical boundaries of nations lose the significance they once held. Also, since "many contemporary authors are themselves in-between cultures", as Ascari points out, much of contemporary literature, as well, can be labelled as "transcultural literature"[33]. He cites the observation of John Pizer, who states that transnational literature written by bilingual and bicultural authors "…is not only calling into question 'the very notion of discrete "national" literatures,' but is also 'helping to redefine the very principle of world literature'"[34]. Ascari labels many of these contemporary texts "life narratives" which bear witness to historical events and contemporary issues in order to call for social and political engagement on the part of their readers[35]. In the face of a post-modernist declaration of the death of the unified subject, Ascari sees these texts as going beyond post-modernism "into a new stage of our cultural revolution" in which "[t]he human is back, right at centre stage"[36]. One sub-group of transcultural or transnational literature is that category defined as "post-memory fiction," in which second-generation individuals attempt to come to terms with traumatic experiences that occurred on the world stage before they were born, but that " '…were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right' "[37]. Such novels take upon themselves the responsibility to compel readers to explore and evaluate historical experiences through texts marked by both "ethical and aesthetic complexity"[38]. *Book of Clouds* is one such example of post-memory fiction, as the protagonist attempts to reconcile what she has been taught by her Jewish parents about the realities of German culture and the Holocaust with her own experiences in the culture.

[33] Ascari 2011: 6.

[34] Pizer cited in Ascari 2011: 6. The author and text under study in the present article embody the concept of transnational literature since Chloe Aridjis's parents are from Mexico and the United States and Chloe herself grew up in the Netherlands and Mexico City, studied at Harvard, obtained her Ph.D. in French literature from Oxford, and currently lives in London. Her novel is about a Jewish Mexican woman studying German in Berlin and was originally written in English.

[35] Ascari 2011: 165-166.

[36] Ascari 2011: 165.

[37] Hirsch in Ascari 2011: 34.

[38] Ascari 2011: 36.

5. Berlin and Book of Clouds*, by Chloe Aridjis*

As Chloe Aridjis's first novel, *Book of Clouds* can be construed as somewhat autobiographical since the author and the protagonist share a number of experiences. Aridjis is the daughter of Homero Aridjis, Mexican poet and diplomat, and Betty Ferber, American scholar and humanitarian. Chloe's father is the son of a Mexican mother and a Greek father from Smyrna. Her mother's ancestors were Jews from Russia, Lithuania and Poland. Because her father served in several diplomatic posts, Chloe spent portions of her childhood in the Netherlands and Switzerland, as well as in Mexico and the United States. She studied at Harvard and Oxford, spent five years in Berlin, and at the time of this writing is living in London[39]. The fictional Tatiana is a Mexican college student of Jewish heritage who goes to Germany on a year-long scholarship and ends up staying for five years, several years after her first encounter with Berlin as a teenager on a tourist trip with her family from Mexico while the city was still divided[40]. The primary action of the novel is told in retrospect at the end of Tatiana's extended stay in Berlin, her self-imposed exile that allows her to postpone returning to a family environment that she finds both reassuring and oppressive. Tatiana's experience in Berlin is conditioned by her uneasy truce with the nation's past and present as they intersect with her interpersonal relationships and her Jewish heritage.

5.1 Berlin through the Eyes of the Outsider

Returning once again to the concept of "contested spaces," one strategy for resisting traditional boundaries that has application for the present study is that proposed by the French philosopher Michel de Certeau in his essay, "Walking in the City" (1984). According to de Certeau, to counter the dominant discourses imposed by urban planners, pedestrians who walk literally at "street level" have the ability to constitute their own reality by conforming to or resisting established and official boundaries[41]. To the extent that those pedestrians conform to established walkways or decide to take shortcuts or circumvent boundaries, they open new spaces both literally and figuratively. In the case of *Book of Clouds*, the protagonist does exactly that: Tatiana observes, wonders, and reflects on the realities which surround her as she traverses the streets of Berlin[42]. Her vantage point as an outsider allows her to question the portrayals of the German nation and history that the official discourses

[39] Jacobs 2011: n.p.

[40] According to her interview with Gerald Jacobs, this is the only incident in the novel that Aridjis identifies as "95% autobiographical" (Jacobs 2011: n.p.).

[41] Gray 2003: 224.

[42] In point of fact, in the opening pages of the novel, the protagonist recounts her first and only experience seeing the Berlin Wall in 1986. While the wall constituted a physical boundary that restricted the movement of Berlin's inhabitants, she observes a protest event in which a

present or that others have tried to impose on her. At the same time, Tatiana's experiences intensify in her own mind the sense of "otherness" that comes from being an *Ausländer* (foreigner). Thus while the experience of "otherness" in Berlin allows Tatiana to produce her own unique perspective on the city, the city also shapes how she views herself.

Tatiana's experiences as an outsider who daily walks the streets of Berlin show readers another perspective on the city not limited by the discourses of tourist blurbs or urban planners. In addition to the cosmopolitan flavour touted by the tourist industry and the sense of historical burden belaboured by government officials and urban planners, Tatiana also witnesses the complexities and incongruities of life in the German capital. With her decidedly apolitical point of view, she is not impressed with the attempts to re-fashion the city into an international symbol of unity and progress. For example, she describes the newly transformed Potsdamer Platz with its skyscrapers that stand out from the rest of the city's skyline as "… a real eyesore … a futuristic playground built from scratch" with "soaring buildings like curved, shiny razor blades"[43]. As she walks through the area of Alexanderplatz in the center of the city, she wonders to herself:

> … whether during my lifetime, or at least during my time in Berlin, [if] the day would come when developers would just *let it be*, and I also wondered, every now and then, how much more of the GDR had to be rubbed out before the drills and the shovels and the blueprints would be laid aside, before places like the Palast der Republik and who knows how many other Socialist buildings and landmarks, beautiful and unbeautiful, would stop being gutted or simply erased from the city map (72, original emphasis).

Neither is she impressed by attempts to re-capture an imaginary past with inauthentic historical reproductions: she comments on the cobblestone streets and cross-cultural boutiques of Savignyplatz as having "always held a bit too much *charm*" (29, original emphasis). In her opinion, Berlin is "… a city that [seeks] out different fashions of its own, some sleek and many ungainly, sifting through piles of possibilities to find the right fit" (26). In most cases, in her opinion, the design of many contemporary buildings results in an "awkward geometry" (141). When Tatiana, aware of all the controversy surrounding the Holocaust memorial, finally visits the site (144), she is repulsed by the design: "It was like walking among 2711 upended sarcophagi, 2711 souls awaiting judgment, in an ad hoc graveyard devoid of markings or inscriptions" (145).

human chain made up of individuals linked arm-in-arm along the perimeter of the wall creates a new solidarity and "voice" that resists oppression (Aridjis 2009: 2-3).

[43] Aridjis 2009: 140. Citations from the novel are hereafter cited in the text by page number only for the rest of the article.

Tatiana's experiences as an observer run the gamut from anomie to fascination to intense fear. Many times, but especially on Sundays, she is plagued by a sense of loneliness (16). In spite of her efforts to build relationships with others, whether platonic or romantic, every attempt to reach out ends in failure. The only "person" with whom she feels a connection is the disembodied announcer's voice on the S-Bahn, the city's elevated train: "I preferred this recorded voice to any other voice I had heard in my life, especially on days when I felt disconnected from the city, attached by the thinnest of strings" (28). On another occasion she again describes her ambivalent relationship with Berlin: "On some days I felt attached to the city and assimilated, on others like some kind of botched transplant with a few renegade veins…" (24). Tatiana's proficiency in speaking German enables her on most occasions to blend in with her surroundings, but there are occasions when she is quite conscious of her status as an outsider, particularly when she is out in public and aware of others observing her. In general, Tatiana feels free to wander about the city on her own, but she also has a sense of being watched, whether by neighbours in her apartment complex watching her with disapproval through their apartment windows (46), or the older man who stares at her while they share the elevator (56). Her reaction to such times is to mentally detach from her surroundings by dehumanizing the people she is observing. For instance, a trip on a crowded subway train compels her to describe her fellow passengers as an assortment of birds: "I began to feel as if I was in some kind of aviary, though one populated with less exotic species than those we had at home. Groups of large black and grey birds with blond tufts laughed and told jokes while scruffy brown birds with ruffled feathers waved bottles of beer" (5). On a later occasion, she experiences a similar sense of alienation as she works on research in a university library and becomes aware of all the small, fidgety movements of the students around her: "...before long I had the impression I was in a room with eighty scholarly monkeys, busily delousing as they sat reading their books or typing at their computers…" (80).

By her own admission, Tatiana's most intense experience as an outsider comes each time she has to face German bureaucracy in the process of renewing her visa. She recalls every detail of the experience, from the building's "squalid salmon-pink corridors" and "waiting room filled with young Turks, Russians and Africans slouched on rows of scuffed white metal chairs bolted to the floor" to the disgusting restroom with its seatless toilets, graffiti and recognizable stench (83). To her, it was as if every aspect of the building was whispering, "Reconsider, reconsider, to every *Ausländer* in search of a visa" (83). The result of the oppressive conditions and the interminable wait affect her to the point that "…every name called out had begun to sound like my own, mispronounced in a new way" (84). For Tatiana, the implicit nationalistic aversion to foreigners communicated by this public space is palpable.

It is only when Tatiana has made the decision to leave Germany and return to her family in Mexico that she identifies those cultural aspects which hold

the most meaning for her and for which she will be most nostalgic: the scenes of daily life lived by ordinary residents in the here and now, in the cafes and post offices and bake shops and flea markets in the neighbourhoods through which she walks (203).

5.2 Walking in the Present, Running into the Past

Tatiana's Jewish heritage is another lens through which she views the city's landmarks and inhabitants. She recalls childhood conversations around the dinner table during which family members described Berlin as the "omphalos of evil" and debated whether Germany even had a right to continue to exist (25). After having witnessed a protest at the Berlin Wall on her first trip to the city in 1986, she boards the subway to return to the hotel and gets separated from her family. As she gazes at the other passengers, she is disturbed by the appearance of one passenger in particular:

> The jowly face, the sweeping forehead, the deep-set furnacy eyes, everything seemed horribly familiar and I felt as if I had seen this face before, but in black and white…[T]he more I stared the more certain I was…Yes, that it was Hitler, Hitler as an old woman, riding westwards…How could it be, I wondered, that forty years after the war I found myself face-to-face with the devil himself, *the devil whose very name cast a shadow on nearly every landscape of my young life?* (6, 7, emphasis added).

Eventually the old woman gets off at her subway stop, followed by four men who Tatiana identifies as Hitler's SS body guards. Of course no one else in her family believes her, but she keeps the memory of that experience with her when she returns to Berlin to study. Finally, one day, she shares her story with her employer, the professor Doktor Freidrich Weiss, a man who has dedicated his life to writing about German history. While he doesn't believe her, either, he does offer an explanation of her experience:

> "No, Tatiana," he continued, "you experienced what one could call the Hitler syndrome. Over time one realizes that Hitler is everywhere. His spirit is just as much in the body of that bluebottle fly there on the windowpane as it was in the old woman you saw on the U-Bahn as in this ballpoint pen lying on the table. He's just as much in that sparrow on the branch as in the insect in the sparrow's beak" (98).

For Tatiana, the reminders of the past continue to haunt the places of the present; on another occasion, as she walks around the city, she comes across a campaign poster for the *Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands,* a right-wing extremist party. The poster portrays a Jewish cemetery and tombstone covered with moss over which the words "WE'LL LET THE GRASS GROW OVER" had been printed (55). Reflecting on the party's "ugly strain

of self-love," she quickly hurries away from that neighbourhood, fearful of any face-to-face encounters with any anti-Semitic extremists who might be lurking about.

After Tatiana interviews the meteorologist Jonas Krantz, a German national who grew up in the former East Berlin, they begin to go out together. While the places to which Jonas takes Tatiana have no personal significance for him, for Tatiana the reverberations from history are inescapable. On their first date, Jonas takes Tatiana to a party associated with Berlin's underground alternative culture. The party takes place in former East Berlin, in an abandoned post office which lies on top of part of the elaborate network of tunnels formerly used by the Nazis and the STASI. While Jonas comments that Berlin needs "regeneration" because it "can't just be a museum of horror," Tatiana is reluctant to agree (109). At one point, Tatiana accompanies some other partiers down into one of the tunnels into an area identified as the "Gestapo bowling alley" (112). The remnants of the room include bowling equipment and even a scoreboard with the last game's tally still visible. When the other people follow the leader back out of the tunnel, Tatiana remains behind and tries to erase the scores written in chalk, thinking "Nazi, Stasi, whatever they were, why the hell should they be granted this kind of posterity?" (115). Tripping in the darkness, she injures her legs and fears that she will be abandoned in that "German Hades" (199) until the others realize she hasn't come out and go back to rescue her.

The next time Jonas and Tatiana go out, as they walk along the avenue Unter den Linden and come to the Holocaust Memorial, Jonas suggests they play "hide and seek" among the memorial stones. Just walking into the area produces in Tatiana "an immediate wave of claustrophobia and disorientation" because of the topography of the place with its uneven pillars: "Once inside the new memorial, the space, which at first seemed so open and exposed, closed in on us with each step we took, the 2711 concrete slabs like a stalled army converging from all sides" (144). She refuses to play the game with Jonas and tries to find him and the way out. Her cries go unheeded, as she describes the impact of the memorial: "…I felt it had robbed us of our voices. In their variety of heights, the slabs were like a horizon of unfinished sentences, each truncated at a different moment, nothing but aborted sentences" (146). Paradoxically, the official discourse represented by the memorial and intended by its designer and the German authorities to express remorse and remembrance for Tatiana results in a silencing both of the victims and the witnesses of the memorial.

The last significant encounter occurs when Tatiana accompanies Doktor Weiss on a visit to Jonas's apartment in the Plattenbaus in Marzhan, a complex of non-descript East German era high-rises. When it is time for the visitors to leave, Jonas offers to accompany them to the taxi stand, but Doktor Weiss refuses the offer, declaring, "'I have lived in this city my entire life, with

the exception of a few unfortunate years. Don't worry about me'" (182). But the old man and Tatiana promptly lose their way in the labyrinth of buildings as twilight falls and are brutally attacked by two young men who beat and rob them. When a fog suddenly descends and envelops the entire city, the two young men get scared and run away, with one of them remarking, "'The old Jew probably laid a curse on us'" (187). Tatiana manages to find her way to a local police station and get help for her injured employer. Later on, Tatiana goes back to the police station and looks through the criminal database mug shots to try to identify the pair of attackers. The police point out that there was "no guarantee that they….had fascist inclinations" (200), but that fails to give Tatiana any reassurance as she now finds herself plagued by an irrational fear about the attackers possibly finding her again. As she reads the newspaper reports from the following day describing the surreal scenes that the fog had produced across the city, she becomes aware of the extent to which a state of anarchy had been unleashed, with an unprecedented number of violent crimes such as robberies, rapes, escaped prisoners and mental patients, injuries and deaths (193-194). It was "…a real abracadabra moment,…in which rules were put on hold and the laws of physics suspended, as all and everything succumbed to this sweeping act of condensation" (192). The fabled disciplined decorum of German society (part of all those official discourses) quickly disappeared when the opportunity for crime with impunity presented itself.

The attack by the two hoodlums turns out to be the turning point in Tatiana's continuance in Berlin. When she visits Doktor Weiss in the hospital, she informs him that she is returning to Mexico to re-join her family there. From that point on, her relationship with the city is entirely different; every "last time to do X" takes on a special significance, while at the same time she feels herself detaching from her surroundings. She feels that the city has turned its back on her and that people are treating her more harshly because she has decided to leave. She thinks of the things she will miss (fresh baked bread and the punctuality of the subway system among other things) but also allows herself to express the irritation with others that she has always suppressed as an outsider:

> I almost felt like grabbing the impatient bus conductor by the shoulders and saying, Look, I'm not from here and as it is I have given five years of my life to this country and am now ready to return to my own, with its own cauldron of problems (204).

As she reflects on these feelings, she notes:

> All the shyness and inhibition I'd felt during my years in Berlin fell away and in the last weeks and days my spoken German flowed more smoothly than ever as I found myself being assertive in a way I'd never dared to before, a final battle cry before heading back to the New World (205).

5.3 Topographies of Memory

Doktor Friedrich Weiss, along with the meteorologist Jonas Krantz, are the other two primary characters in the novel, each with his own particular views on Berlin. Doktor Weiss lives an isolated life enclosed in a small, dark apartment; although once renowned for his prolific writings on German history, he now spends his days reminiscing about his childhood and dictating essays for Tatiana to transcribe. When she reviews the journals and books in his office, she realizes that he has not published anything since the 1980s (42). In Doktor Weiss's eyes, the disappearance of some historical places in the city has robbed him of cherished memories: "…he spoke about certain corners in Mitte and Charlottenburg, corners that once held sway over a child's imagination, but were later reduced to grey cement angles devoid of meaning" (50). At the same time, he objects to attempts to re-purpose buildings associated with Hitler's regime for other uses; converting the Wasserturm, a building once used for torturing anti-Fascist prisoners, into apartments is "'…nearly as outrageous as what they did with the villa where the Wannsee conference was held, which, for *thirty-six years* after the war, was used as a hostel for inner-city children. Imagine the sort of energy those children imbibed, playing games in the room where the "Final Solution" for getting rid of every single Jew in Europe was laid out…'" (96, original emphasis). For Weiss, "Spaces cling to their pasts…and sometimes the present finds a way of accommodating this past and sometimes it doesn't" (33).

Jonas Krantz, growing up in East Berlin, became fascinated with clouds as a symbol of the freedom not available to him in the GDR (60). As an adult, he becomes a free-lance weather consultant working from his small apartment. For Jonas, clouds hold the key for interpreting life:

> …. [T]he message [clouds] offer: all structures are collapsible. Just look at their own existence, condemned to rootlessness and fragmentation. Each cloud faces death through loss of form, drifting towards its death, some faster than others, destined to self-destruct before it reaches the other end of the horizon. After living in the times I've lived in, you create your own concept of flux. Without sounding too simplistic, meteorology helped me understand - and maybe even cope with - recent history, before and after nineteen eighty-nine. The fogs of time and all the obfuscation that surrounds them (62).

Thus, he shrugs off the dissolution of German Democratic Republic as an artificial creation, arbitrary and erratic in its existence (63). On another occasion, as Doktor Weiss and Jonas talk about their city, Tatiana overhears them as they resort to another analogy:

> They spoke about the merging of East and West Berlin as if they were a pair of human lungs, one pink and healthy and the other tinged with grey like that of a moderate smoker, trying to breathe in unison but every now and then still

> gasping for air… I kept returning to [this image] much later, this fusing of two spongy organs, one considerably hardier, breathing in the same elements from the atmosphere and feeding oxygen into the system to keep circulation going at all costs (180).

All three characters inevitably construct their own interpretation of life, culture and history in Berlin based on personal observations, experiences and reactions to events. Not one of them seems to be able to fully embrace the realities of the Berlin in which they reside: Weiss cares too much about the past, while Jonas chooses to turn away from it completely. Tatiana, for her part, can't accept Weiss's desire to live in the past. As she observes, Doktor Weiss "…mourns *all that could have been* instead of going out and seeing *all that had become*" (173, original emphasis). At the same time, she is not comfortable with Jonas's urging to forget the reminders of the past and live as though the horrors of history didn't matter anymore, especially now that she has had personal experience with the expression and consequences of anti-Semitism.

The Tatiana who boards the plane to fly back to Mexico has changed her views about German culture and has herself been changed by her experiences in Berlin. She has come to see that she is able to think for herself and not blindly accept what her parents have taught her. She has come to accept the ambiguities of life in Berlin—the good, the bad, and the strange—and perhaps even embraced the lesson about clouds offered to her by Jonas - that everything and everyone is in a constant state of flux and change, just like the clouds: "I remember thinking…there was little difference between clouds and shadows and other phenomena given shape by the human imagination" (209). Even though she's going back to the sometimes oppressive closeness of her Mexican family, she has a less pre-conditioned sense of self that can hold her own now against the demands of parents and siblings (101, 205, 207).

6. Challenging Nationalism

In literature, as in life, the outsider can bring a fresh perspective to institutionalized culture and events. The exiled individual, in contrast to the traveller or tourist, is not just "passing through" a particular spot, but has taken up at least temporary residence in his/her new homeland. But at the same time, the exiled one has to live with the sense of never being completely "at home" in the new environment and the realization that he or she is always seen as the outsider. As one sees the city of Berlin through the eyes of an outsider, even in the case of a fictional protagonist such as in *Book of Clouds*, one recognizes the presence of "contested spaces" in which the official discourse and images presented by the dominant groups are challenged by the realities that exist at "street level," where the dissidents and the disenfranchised endure and where, at the same time, the lines between opposing ideologies begin to blur.

The function of collective memory or collective remembering is to select which elements from a nation's history will be preserved and emphasized to become part of the national narrative intended to guide the beliefs, loyalties, and behaviours of its people[44]. But just like with clouds, experience would tell us that memories are elusive and can signify whatever interpretation a particular individual chooses to attribute to them. Monuments to the past may or may not convey the message intended by those who created them; their significance endures only as long as the collective memory of the people attribute that particular significance to them. An individual's associations with a particular monument are conditioned by the individual's personal experience and knowledge of that monument much more than by any official discourse.

What is true of the fictional character in Aridjis's novel may also be true for the future of Berlin: "fragmentation connotes self-empowerment and successful resistance to oppression"[45]. In other words, for the individual as well as for communities, strength lies in encountering a multiplicity of discourses. Although the "elites" have the dominant voice in determining the identity of Berlin and the nation, not everyone supports their vision. The dominant discourse has been and will continue to be challenged by those who feel excluded[46]. And in reality, the identity struggle faced by Berlin and Germany is a part of the larger struggle for Europe as a whole, as it seeks to re-define itself in a post-Soviet era now under the auspices of the European Union. The traditional notions of nationalism are being challenged by "a proliferation of micro-contact zones between intra- and extra-European cultures that have been brought into contact by migrations" and other factors[47]. A novel such as *Book of Clouds* can be aligned with works of that transcultural literature representative of literature of the global age, since, by uncovering "the fiction of ethic singularity on which most nations ultimately rely,"[48] it serves to challenge those dominant discourses of nationalism.

Works cited

Appadurai, Arjun. 2003. Sovereignty without Territoriality: Notes for a Postnational Geography. In *The Anthropology of Space and Place*, eds. Setha M. Low and Denish Lawrence-Zúñiga, 337-349. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing.

Aridjis, Chloe. 2009. *Book of Clouds*. New York: Grove/Atlantic, Inc.

Ascari, Maurizio. 2011. *Literature of the Global Age*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., Inc.

"Berlin International." Online, accessed 14 December 2011. http://www.berlin.de/international/index.en.php

[44] Wertsch 2009: 119.

[45] Brown and Goozé 1995: xv.

[46] Gittus 2002: 112.

[47] Ascari 2011: 20.

[48] Appadurai 2003: 346.

Bernt, Matthias, Britta Grell, and Andrej Holm, eds. 2013. *The Berlin Reader: A Compendium on Urban Change and Activism*. Bielefield, Germany: Transcript.

Boyer, Pascal and James V. Wertsch, eds. 2009. *Memory in Mind and Culture.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Boyer, Pascal. 2009. What are Memories For? Functions of Recall in Cognition and Culture. In *Memory in Mind and Culture*, eds. Pascal Boyer and James V. Wertsch, 3-28. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Brown, Anne E. and Marjanne E. Goozé, eds. (1995). *International Women's Writing: New Landscapes of Identity*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Cafferty, Helen. 2000. Berlin. In *Encyclopedia of German Literature*, vol. 1, ed. Matthias Konzett, 89-93. Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers.

Danto, Arthur C. 2005. Mute Point. *The Nation* (17 October): 40-44.

De Certeau, Michel. 1984. Walking in the City. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, translated by S. Randall, 91-110. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Gittus, E. J. 2002. Berlin as a Conduit for the Creation of German National Identity at the End of the Twentieth Century. *Space & Polity* 6: 91-115.

Gray, John. 2003. Open Spaces and Dwelling Places: Being at Home on Hill Farms in the Scottish Borders. In *The Anthropology of Space and Place*, eds. Setha M. Low and Denish Lawrence-Zúñiga, 224-244. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing.

Germany Demographics Profile: 2013. Indexmundi. Online, accessed 17 August 2014. http://www.indexmundi.com/germany/demographics_profile.html

Holocaust Memorial. A View on Cities. Online, accessed 28 December 2011. http://www.aviewoncities.com/berlin/holocaustmemorial.htm

Itzkoff, Dave. Architect Chosen for Berlin Palace. *The New York Times* (29 November 2008), p. C2. Online, accessed 16 January 2012 from http://www.NYTimes.com.

Jacobs, Gerald. Interview: Chloe Aridjis. *The Jewish Chronicle Online*. Online, accessed 30 September 2011 from http://www.thejc.com/arts/arts-interviews/interview-chloe-aridjis

Ladd, Brian. 1997. *The Ghosts of Berlin: Confronting German History in the Urban Landscape*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Low, Setha M. and Denish Lawrence-Zúñiga, eds. 2003. *The Anthropology of Space and Place*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing.

McDonogh, Gary W. 2003. Myth, Space, and Virtue: Bars, Gender, and Change in Barcelona's *Barrio Chino*. In *The Anthropology of Space and Place*, eds. Setha M. Low and Denish Lawrence-Zúñiga, 264-283. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing.

Novy, Johannes. 2013. Berlin Does Not Love You: Notes on Berlin's "Tourism Controversy" and its Discontents. In *The Berlin Reader: A Compendium on Urban Change and Activism*, eds. Matthias Bernt, Britta Grell, and Andrej Holm. Bielefield, Germany: Transcript.

Rodman, Margaret C. 2003. Empowering Place: Multilocality and Multivocality. In *The Anthropology of Space and Place*, eds. Setha M. Low and Denish Lawrence-Zúñiga, 204-223. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing.

Wertsch, James V. 2009. Collective Memory. In *Memory in Mind and Culture*, eds. Pascal Boyer and James V. Wertsch, 117-137. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wise, Michael Z. 1998. *Capital Dilemma: Germany's Search for a New Architecture of Democracy.* New York: Princeton Architectural Press.