

TRACING HISTORY THROUGH BERLIN'S TOPOGRAPHY: HISTORICAL MEMORIES AND POST-1989 BERLIN NARRATIVES

CAROL ANNE COSTABILE-HEMING¹

ABSTRACT

As the capital of united Germany, Berlin has sought to navigate a multitude of pasts, as it defines its image in the twenty-first century. The city's topography provides ample examples of the multiple remnants of the past, which are visible not only in the city's architectural heritage, but also hidden beneath the city's barren spaces. Whereas others have investigated the architectural and archaeological dimensions of the rebuilt Berlin, I focus on the ways that Berlin novels in the late 1990s have embedded discussions about these barren spaces into their stories. This essay presents a close reading of F. C. Delius's *Die Flatterzunge*, Peter Schneider's *Eduards Heimkehr*, and Michael Kleeberg's *Ein Garten im Norden*. Each text reveals that Berlin's history and topography are intertwined intricately, a condition that has a profound impact on the city's residents. Insofar as the creators of the New Berlin's image cannot ignore the multiple pasts that suffuse the city, these novelists and their protagonists equally are incapable of escaping their own national history. This essay thus analyses the three protagonists' engagement with the city's geographic spaces as they confront the impact that Berlin's past legacies continue to have on their lives.

Berlin's topography can be read as a microcosm of twentieth-century German history; countless buildings, street corners and squares remind residents and visitors alike of the layers of history embedded in the very fabric of the city. The multiple tiers of remnants from the past remain at the forefront of debates about the rebuilding of Berlin since the city's unification and re-designation as the capital of a united Germany. This has led Brian Ladd to label Berlin a 'haunted city', one whose architecture and structures function as 'repositories of memory'.² Going a step further, Peter Fritzsche suggests that the city serves as the geographic centre of German memory.³ Erhard Schütz refines Fritzsche's suggestion, observing that Berlin is 'fascinated by its own past, by the Berlin of the 1920s'.⁴ In his seminal essay, 'The Voids of Berlin', Andreas Huyssen not only reads the city of Berlin as a historical text, he argues convincingly that 'absences' mark

¹ I would like to thank Dr Rachel Halverson and Dr James Parsons for their insightful reading of this article.

² Brian Ladd, *The Ghosts of Berlin. Confronting German History in the Urban Landscape*, Chicago 1997, pp. 1 and 4

³ Peter Fritzsche, 'History as Trash: Reading Berlin 2000', *Studies in Twentieth- and Twenty-First Century Literature*, 28.1 (2004) [*Special Issue: Writing and Reading Berlin*, ed. Stephen Brockmann], 81.

⁴ Erhard Schütz, 'Arrivals, Arrivees: Literary Encounters with Berlin in the Weimar and Berlin Republics', trans. Stephen Brockmann, *ibid.*, 25.

Berlin. Whereas Ladd focuses on existing architectural structures as embodiments of particular periods of German history, Huyssen views Berlin as a site of 'discontinuous' and 'ruptured history'.⁵ The rapid succession of German states in the twentieth century has left marks and gaps in the city. Thus, in addition to a rich architectural heritage, Berlin also is home to barren spaces. It is there that history lies just below the surface, and such empty tracts of land, I contend, have just as much interest and historical potential as architectural structures still standing.⁶ Indeed, as reconstruction in Berlin progresses and the excavation of these deserted spaces continues, there is the potential for history to be 'unearthed', as occurred at the site of the Prinz Albrecht Hotel, now home to the Topography of Terror exhibition.⁷ Whereas in this instance the invisible legacy of the property has been made visible, there are countless other such repositories of memory that soon may disappear. As Berlin progresses through the twenty-first century, the past grows ever more distant and so, too, does its memory. As Fritzsche writes, 'the absence of presence [and] the presence of absence' are complementary characters in the story of Berlin.⁸

Three empty spaces have been the focus of intense scrutiny in the years following unification: the areas adjacent to Potsdamer and Leipziger Platz, the Schlossplatz, and the tract of land bordering the Brandenburg Gate.⁹ If, as Richard Terdman claims, 'memory is the present past',¹⁰ then it is appropriate to ask what evidence of the past still remains. Whereas others have investigated the architectural and archaeological dimensions of the rebuilt Berlin, I choose to undertake a literary expedition, to explore the ways that Berlin novels in the late 1990s have embedded discussions about these barren spaces into their fables. For this purpose I examine three texts: F. C. Delius's *Die Flatterzunge* and Peter Schneider's *Eduards Heimkehr* (both 1999) and Michael Kleeberg's *Ein Garten im Norden* (1998). Delius and Schneider situate the plots of their novels in the mid 1990s, lending their treatment of developments in Berlin's cityscape a contemporary

⁵ Andreas Huyssen, 'The Voids of Berlin', *Critical Inquiry*, 24 (Autumn 1997), 58.

⁶ Given the building wave ongoing in Berlin, one now seldom encounters empty tracts of land. As the area surrounding Potsdamer Platz and Leipziger Platz fills up, only the Schlossplatz in Berlin's historic centre and the area adjacent to the Brandenburg Gate, the site of the future memorial to the murdered Jews of Europe, remain as truly barren spaces.

⁷ For additional discussion of this site, see Reinhard Rürup (ed.), *Topography of Terror. Gestapo, SS and Reichssicherheitsamt on the 'Prinz-Albrecht-Terrain'*. A Documentation, 8th edition, Berlin 1999.

⁸ Fritzsche, *loc. cit.*

⁹ For comprehensive discussions of the debate on the Schlossplatz see Hannes Swoboda (ed.), *Der Schlossplatz in Berlin. Bilanz einer Debatte*, Berlin 2002; or Susanne Ledanff, 'The Palace of the Republic versus the Stadtschloss. The Dilemmas of Planning in the Heart of Berlin', *German Politics and Society*, 21.4 (2003), 30–73. For comprehensive discussions about the Holocaust memorial site see Michael S. Cullen (ed.), *Das Holocaust-Mahnmal. Dokumentation einer Debatte*, Zürich 1999; or Ute Heimrod, Günter Schlusche and Horst Seferens (eds), *Der Denkmalstreit – das Denkmal? Die Debatte um das Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas*. Eine Dokumentation, Berlin 1999.

¹⁰ Richard Terdman, *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis*, Ithaca 1993, p. viii.

flavour. Both works address the questions of the appropriate use for two historically charged sites. Whereas Delius selects the Potsdamer Platz as a site of potential amnesia, Schneider questions the privileging of memory by allowing the debate about the razing of the Palast der Republik to stand as a metaphor for the broader question of land ownership in East and West. In both cases, urban planning decisions from the period of Berlin's division serve as the historical reference points for decisions about contemporary urban policies. Conversely, Kleeberg's presentation of Berlin's topography does not allow itself to be pinpointed directly. Instead he delves deeper into Berlin's history, exposing the strong ties to the Weimar era that remain in present-day Berlin. Close reading of these three narratives reveals that Berlin's history and topography are intertwined intricately and that they have a profound impact on the city's residents. Insofar as the creators of the New Berlin's image cannot ignore the multiple pasts suffusing the city, these novelists and their protagonists are equally incapable of escaping their own national history. In the pages that follow I analyse the three protagonists' engagement with the city's geographic spaces as they confront the impact that Berlin's past legacies continue to have on their lives.

The shortest of the three texts under discussion, Delius's *Die Flatterzunge*, binds the ever-present German guilt about the atrocities of the Third Reich directly to the behaviour of his protagonist, Hannes. As a trombonist with the 'Orchester der Deutschen Oper', Hannes enjoys the stature that his position accords him. Cautiously aware of the international significance of the opera company's invitation to perform in Israel, Hannes, unlike his fellow musicians, strives to appear un-German, preferring lighter-coloured clothing to an ensemble of brown or black that could evoke memories of the Nazis in the Israeli populace. Despite the care he takes with his appearance, Hannes is unable to prevent his own egregious misbehaviour bringing shame not only to him, but also on the opera company and the German nation at large. In a situation based on an embarrassing but true incident from 1997, Delius's protagonist falsifies his name in a Tel Aviv bar: the name Hannes chooses is 'Adolf Hitler'. The narrative subsequently unfolds as a stream-of-consciousness diary in which the protagonist attempts to explain his actions as he prepares for a court petition to reinstate him in the orchestra. Throughout, Hannes devotes considerable energy to proving that he is not an anti-Semite, while concomitantly refusing to recognise the anti-Semitic overtone of his deed. Thus the uncalculated action reveals a deeper, subconscious level of anti-Semitism. As Hannes tries to fill the void in his life caused by his sudden unemployment, he wanders through Berlin, an act that slowly allows him to discover the subtle ways in which the city's tortured history continues to impact on his behaviour. A walk through the Tiergarten district impresses upon him the visible reminders of the past that infuse the cityscape:

Du bist mitten in Berlin, wie du dich auch drehst, wie du dich auch wendest.
Unter dem Gras die Vulkane der Vergangenheit. Je tiefer du ins Grüne

vordringst, desto eher wird dir plötzlich das Blickfeld frei auf die Brocken der Geschichte, auf Trümmer von Wilhelm, von den Nazis, von Stalin, von Ulbricht, auf die Gruben und Fassaden der neuen Bundesherrlichkeit. Es gibt kein Idyll in Berlin, hier auch nicht.¹¹

Originally intended as a means to escape his problems, these journeys through Berlin serve only to intensify the oppressiveness of history as Hannes experiences it in his imagination.

Having resided in Berlin for 30 years, Hannes takes little notice of the cityscape until after the incident in Israel. Though he survived the division of the city as a resident of West Berlin, he only begins consciously to confront the absences the Nazi period left behind once the construction of the New Berlin begins after unification. The idea of reconstructing an image appeals to him, and he begins his walks intent on finding solace; he manages to escape from his problems on the top of the InfoBox at Leipziger Platz. From the viewing terrace, Hannes witnesses history's unearthing: 'aus dem Totenstreifen wurde ein Tortenstück' (108). Typical of Hannes's disengagement from the historical importance of his surroundings, this flippant observation serves to belittle the greater historical impact of this hotly contested topography, which Brian Ladd has called a 'significant void', whose 'significance can only be recovered through memory and history' (115). Both in the narrative and in real time there is a definite need for a greater awareness of the past than is demonstrated by what is being built there. Even before it became the world's largest construction site, Andreas Huyssen argues, this geographic space was a 'void saturated with invisible history, with memories of architecture both built and unbuilt'.¹²

At first glance the barrenness of a Potsdamer Platz under construction symbolises Hannes's need to detach himself both from his deed and from the gravity of German history. Delving deeper into Hannes's motivations and the historical background of Potsdamer Platz, however, permits us to read him as symbolic of the German nation constantly struggling to master its past and emerge from under the burden of its history. For Hannes, the InfoBox stands 'thronend über der Geschichte' (53), an observation that does no justice to the high-tech images displayed inside, on which Hannes makes no comment. These displays present simulations of what reality can or will be.¹³ Not only does this model project the future skyline of the city, it attempts simultaneously to reproduce and recreate the once vibrant landscape. As the corporate glitz of the Daimler and Sony quarters replaces the former death strip, one can be lulled into complacency, for it

¹¹ Friedrich Christian Delius, *Die Flatterzunge*, Reinbek bei Hamburg 1999, p. 122. Further references appear in the text.

¹² Huyssen, 65–6.

¹³ I borrow the term simulation here from Bodo Morshäuser, *Die Berliner Simulation*, Frankfurt a.M. 1983.

seems that Germany has moved on, in the sense that it has mastered its division.¹⁴ As successive generations visit this historical site, their attention will be directed toward the consumption of goods and away from the historical meaning of this terrain. The absences that linger in the topographical surroundings of Potsdamer Platz and Leipziger Platz lie beneath the surface; it is only during excavation that historical evidence may break through. It is this aspect of Potsdamer Platz that resounds in Hannes's behaviour: his anti-Semitism – though he struggles to prove that he is not anti-Semitic – bubbles just below the surface, only to explode in a fake signature in an Israeli hotel bar.

The choice of Potsdamer Platz as Hannes's scene of comfort is not accidental, for here history is more absent than present. The deportation of the Jews and the Final Solution virtually erased all of Jewish culture from the Berlin landscape, most noticeably in the Aryanisation of Jewish businesses and the destruction of synagogues. It seems in a way that Hannes is returning to the scene of the crime, though here it is not his crime but the historical crime that takes precedence. Ladd asserts that the rebuilding of Potsdamer Platz can serve to move Berlin 'out of the shadows of Hitler and the Wall' (125). If we take this to be true, then for Hannes, Potsdamer Platz represents the possibility of rebirth, where he too can break out of Hitler's shadow. Critics of developments in this urban landscape typically bemoan the Americanisation of the topography in the form of garish shopping centres. Bonnie Marranca observes that the overly capitalistic and corporate dimension of the 'new' Potsdamer Platz offers 'the amnesia of consumerism'.¹⁵ The idea of amnesia is intriguing, for that is exactly what Hannes wishes for: to be able to forget what happened. The reason that Hannes finds the InfoBox so appealing is that there he actually is capable of forgetting his problem 'zum ersten Mal nach so vielen Monaten!' (55). Even when his glance falls on the vacant site between Potsdamer Platz and the Brandenburg Gate, where the monument to the murdered Jews of Europe is to be built, he is not reminded of his actions in Tel Aviv. In other words, the open spaces lack meaning for him.

Whether present or absent, the German past informs Hannes' actions. In seeking solace in the re-construction of Potsdamer Platz, Hannes gives form to his own quest – a desire to re-construct his past. As the history that lies underneath Potsdamer Platz is unearthed, there is a chance almost to erase it, to act as if it never happened. What one sees today in Potsdamer Platz has little in common with the once vibrant traffic intersection, and it does not have much that reminds the visitor visually of what took place

¹⁴ For a further discussion of this, see Deborah Smail and Corey Ross, 'New Berlins and new Germanies: history, myth and the German capital in the 1920s and 1990s', *Representing the German Nation: History and Identity in twentieth-century Germany*, ed. Mary Fulbrook and Martin Swales, Manchester 2000. Smail and Ross, p. 73, liken this moving on to the attainment of 'normality'.

¹⁵ Bonnie Marranca, 'Berlin Contemporary: An Editorial', *Performing Arts Journal*, 65 (2000), 3.

there in the 1930s and 1940s. Perhaps Hannes wishes to build over his own past, without a Nazi father: an impending second trip to Israel serves as a possible first step in this direction, though Delius leaves Hannes's quest for a new identity unresolved.

Peter Schneider, long known for his interest in the problems confronting German society, both before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall, uses Berlin as both a narrative backdrop for *Eduards Heimkehr* and as a metaphor for coming to terms with the past. When Eduard Hoffmann returns to a unified Berlin after a hiatus in California, it is to claim his inheritance, a dilapidated apartment building in Friedrichshain, in the former East Berlin. Mid-1990s Berlin functions as an allegory for the German nation, for Eduard must re-acquaint himself not only with a city he once knew well, but also with the very depths of German history he was able to escape in California. The Berlin that Schneider depicts in this novel is one poised to assume its role as a world city, as soon as it can complete its reconstructed cityscape and find an appropriate way to solve the question of whether to preserve or erase the past. Through a third-person narrator, readers accompany Eduard as he negotiates Berlin's ever-changing landscape, as he confronts a hidden family history, and as he acknowledges that he cannot divorce himself from the past, not his own, not that of his family, and not that of the German nation.

Eduard encounters Berlin's barren spaces on two occasions. An invitation to a reception at the Weinhaus Huth, occasioned by his wife's job interview with the Debis company, affords Eduard a direct encounter with the construction at Potsdamer Platz not accorded to ordinary citizens. Reflecting on his past encounters with this terrain, he recalls the observation towers on the western side of the Wall. Subsequently contemplating the Wall's disappearance leads him then to review in retrospect the 'Ruinen des Platzes', remnants from the bombing of the city during World War II.¹⁶ Unlike Hannes who chooses to look down upon this historical site, Eduard, from his vantage point on the roof of the Weinhaus Huth, scans the surrounding panorama. What he sees, or more aptly does not see, forces him to ponder the paradox of constructed and barren spaces in Berlin's landscape:

Aber auch im bebauten Umfeld dieser ungeheuren Leere entdeckte er nur hin und wieder Zeichen, die auf ein jahrhundertaltes städtisches Leben deuteten. Aus der Höhe der Dachterrasse wirkte die Stadt, als seien die meisten ihrer Bauten von einem Hubschrauber abgeworfen worden. Vom Gropiusbau blickte er über namenlose Flachdächer zum Handelszentrum, im Dunst dahinter erschienen, wie Zitate aus einer anderen Stadt, die beiden Dome des Gendarmenmarks, der festungsartige, von Wilhelm II. verpatzte Berliner

¹⁶ Peter Schneider, *Eduards Heimkehr*, Reinbek bei Hamburg 1999, p. 164. Subsequent references appear in the text.

Dom, dann kam lange wieder nichts bis auf den Fernsehturm und die klobigen Kanten der Charité, schließlich der düstere Reichstag. Was ihn verstörte, war nicht die Häßlichkeit, sondern die Abwesenheit eines Stadtbildes. Der weitaus stärkste Eindruck, der sich aus dieser Höhe mitteilte, waren die riesigen Lücken zwischen mehr oder minder geglückten Unikaten. (164–5)

Eduard's astute observation, which attributes Berlin's hotchpotch of architectural styles to the arbitrary decisions of successive city planners, scratches the surface of the conundrum the city's contemporary planners must address as they go about the business of urban re-design. The resolution of debates about the construction of Berlin's empty centre consists in finding a balance between past, present, and future that not only does justice to the memories of the past but also allows for the future potential of Berlin to ascend to the ranks of world cities. Despite the centrality of these debates in the media, Eduard expresses surprise to learn:

Seit zwei Jahren tobte ein Streit in der Stadt über die Frage, wie die Stadtmitte konstruiert werden sollte. Die anfangs nur akademische Debatte hatte sich nach und nach zu einem Krieg um Geschichte und Identität ausgewachsen, in dem sich sämtliche Empfindlichkeiten, Ressentiments und Haßgefühle zwischen Ost- und Westberliner sammelten. (288)

The highly charged space, which the Palast der Republik currently occupies and which is the former site of the Hohenzollern Royal Palace, provides the second venue for Eduard's encounter with one of Berlin's historically privileged spaces. His battle to wrest his property from anarchist squatters takes on an additional, symbolic dimension when the squatters participate in a demonstration in Berlin's historic centre. Via television news broadcasts, Eduard witnesses the demonstration as it progresses down the Karl-Liebknecht-Straße and protestors conflate chants about the Nazis and the 'battle' for the Palast der Republik: 'Nazi-Erben legen Friedrichshain in Scherben! – Arisierer! Diesmal seid ihr die Verlierer! – Friede den Hütten! Krieg den Schlössern!' (285). His attorney recognises that the squatters have seized the opportunity offered by the debate surrounding the demolition of the Palast der Republik and the rebuilding of the Hohenzollern Royal Palace to promote what they perceive as Eduard's injustice in wanting to take possession of his own apartment building. With the references to Aryanisation and Nazi inheritance, they have tied Eduard to past injustices, for in order to take possession of his apartment building he first must prove that his grandfather acquired the property from its Jewish owner legally and not as part of the forced acquisition of Jewish assets. Thus Berlin's topography becomes a symbol for the historical, political, and ideological battles of the past. Here the questions of culpability and complicity fall to the generations of the children, and, in Eduard's case, grandchildren, to deny or defend. Schneider thus focuses on the inability of the Germans to let the issues of the past die:

'es war, als versuchten die Täterkinder das Ungeheuer der deutschen Schuld zu befriedigen, indem sie ihm immer wieder frische Schuldige aus den eigenen Reihen zuführten' (314). As Stephen Brockmann writes, the most recent developments in Germany, including the reunification of Berlin, propel the issues of Nazi property theft again into the limelight.¹⁷ Whereas Hannes's deed made him appear to be anti-Semitic, Eduard is deemed guilty through familial ties.

In the case of Eduard's apartment building, initial ownership questions relate to the restitution of de-privatised property. Though this rule applied in general to property-ownership issues in the East, there was a stipulation allowing for claims to be made back to 1933. Eduard's family came into possession of the house on the Rigaer Straße when his grandfather purchased it from the previous owner, Kasimir Marwitz. Ultimately Eduard can prove his family's innocence. He learns that, although his grandfather was indeed a member of the Nazi party, he used that membership as a ruse to enable him to help the Marwitz family. Thus Eduard's grandfather is portrayed as honourable.

Within the context of this family drama, Schneider's protagonist finds the architectural changes in the city particularly distressing. As he travels through the constantly changing landscape, he likens the construction sites to a human body, whose 'aufgerissene[r] Körper' is displayed 'wie auf einem riesigen Operationstisch' (273). The wounds are the sores of history: 'dieser verfluchte Leib war ja tatsächlich durchwachsen von stillgelegten oder schlafenden Geschwüren, jeden Tag stießen die Diagnosegeräte auf neue Einschlüsse und Verstopfungen' (274). The underlying question about Eduard's ancestry reveals a second layer to the Berlin landscape, which the critic Roland Müller describes as one 'bestehend aus einer dicken braunen Brühe'.¹⁸ Such critical insight draws to the forefront precisely the image and history that Berlin appears to want to cover. From her distanced perspective in Florida, Edita Schlandt, a descendent of Kasimir Marwitz, cannot comprehend that there is such continued and intense interest in the Nazi past. Her ironic quip 'Geteilt oder vereinigt – sobald man etwas bohrt, spritzt der braune Dreck wieder hervor' (358) could be read as a type of resignation, that the past, though perhaps invisible, cannot be mastered. It is telling that Schneider's novel, despite its setting in the recently re-unified capital, still has as a focal point the complicated and still unresolved relationship of individual Germans to the Nazi past. Equally noteworthy is contemporary scholarship's lack of critical engagement with this issue in the context of the novel. Instead, scholars

¹⁷ Stephen Brockmann, 'Divided and Reunited Berlin in Peter Schneider's Fiction', in *Berlin. The Symphony Continues: Orchestrating Architectural, Social, and Artistic Change in Germany's New Capital*, ed. Carol Anne Costabile-Heming, Rachel J. Halverson and Kristie A. Foell, Berlin 2004, p. 236.

¹⁸ Roland Müller, 'Diese verrückte Stadt. Peter Schneider schrieb einen Gegenwartsroman über Berlin', *Neues Deutschland*, 29 October 1999, 12.

have been unable to agree on just what the novel says about East and West coming together.¹⁹

More ambitious than either Delius or Schneider, Kleeberg probes further into German history, re-visiting the potential of the Weimar Republic, as he allows his narrator to explore the possibility of a more humanistic German past. *Ein Garten im Norden* also has a more complicated narrative structure than the other two texts. Operating on two different narrative levels, the first level of narration functions ostensibly as a framework for the second. Progressing through the novel, the two narrative levels flow into each other; the two different temporal planes merge, as past becomes present. Much like Schneider's Eduard, Kleeberg's narrator, Albert Klein, returns to Germany after twelve years of self-imposed exile in Amsterdam and Paris, where he had been working for an American company that produced software manuals. The country to which he returns, a recently united Germany, bears little resemblance to the nation he remembers. Through this character Kleeberg is able to explore questions of identity, for the narrator asks: 'Wie kann man in ein Land zurück wollen, in dem nur die Gegenwart existierte, in dem man nur die Gegenwart gelebt hatte?'²⁰ Albert Klein takes a very negative view of German history and post-World War II West German development. He rationalises that the division of Germany in 1945 created a fissure in historical continuity. Because of this break, it is easy to divorce one's self from the past, to forget, or at least to *not* remember. This emphasis on the present in contemporary Germany serves as a means to survive the trauma of the past, or in Albert's view, as a means to avoid mastering it. In many ways Albert does not like being a German, for he cannot divorce his own identity from the historical identity of his nation. Yet it is precisely Kleeberg's turn to the Weimar era that enables him to breach the fissure in historical continuity and fantasise about a different history for twentieth-century Germany.

Before his return to Germany Albert takes a short business trip to Prague. While there, an experience touches on his potential connection to Germany's past. Engraved on the walls of the Pinchas synagogue he finds the name A. Klein among the names of the 77,000 murdered in Terezín.

¹⁹ Costabile-Heming focuses on Eduard's inability to overcome the wall in his head. See Carol Anne Costabile-Heming, 'Peter Schneider's *Eduards Heimkehr* and the Image of the "New Berlin"', *German Studies Review*, 25.3 (2002), 497–510. On the other hand, Mews heralds Eduard's homecoming as a symbol of 'successful (re)integration'. See Siegfried Mews, 'The Desire to Achieve "Normalcy" – Peter Schneider's Post-Wall Berlin Novel *Eduard's Homecoming*', *Studies in Twentieth- and Twenty-First Century Literature*, 28.1 (2004), 258–85 (here 281) [Brockmann, the editor of this issue, chastises Schneider for portraying the East-West conflict with 'unproblematic positivism' (241), presenting a 'form of German identity [that] reinforces' preconceived American notions of what it means to be German (242)]. Langer concludes that it is the East-West conflict that is the primary thrust of the novel. See Phil C. Langer, *Kein Ort. Überall. Die Einschreibung von 'Berlin' in die deutsche Literatur der neunziger Jahre*, Berlin 2002.

²⁰ Michael Kleeberg, *Ein Garten im Norden*, Munich 2001, p. 31. Further references will appear in the text.

Though the name ultimately is Abraham and not Albert, for a brief moment the narrator senses how different his life could be if the course of history were to be altered. Later, in an antiquarian bookstore, the store-owner addresses him by name and informs him: 'Ich habe Ihr Buch' (40). The book in question is a bound volume of empty pages; it is not meant to be read, but rather to be written in. Confused, Albert, also a frustrated writer, does not understand the book's purpose. In an interesting twist the store-owner informs him that what he writes in the book, when it is complete, will become reality:

Das heißt, Sie werden es in den Geschichtsbüchern nachlesen können, vorausgesetzt, es gehört in die Geschichtsbücher. Und wenn nicht, wäre es das erste Mal, daß der Autor solch eines Buches nicht direkt oder indirekt mit den Konsequenzen, die er geschaffen hat, konfrontiert wird. (46)

Though he is unaware of it at this time, this prophecy subsequently allows Albert to confront twentieth-century German history directly as he attempts to redirect its path.

Albert's obsession with writing in 'his' book begins following a visit to a vacant parcel of land in the centre of Berlin. His cousin and father play a role in speculating on the sale of this prime piece of real estate, which apparently has no record of prior ownership. Kleeberg gives no precise location for the tract of land. The real-estate developer, Steinhart, describes it simply as 'ein Stück Brachland, mitten in Berlin, quasi auf der Grenze, wo die Mauer verlief. Ungefähr quadratisch. Potentiell ein Multimillionenobjekt' (75). While Delius and Schneider rely on exact geographic locations to underscore the importance of specific historical sites for their individual protagonists' identity quest, Kleeberg's more ambiguous geography fulfils a similar function. This site is representative of the potential of all historical sites to force individuals to ponder the course of history. Addressing Berlin's historical import, Albert insists 'Hier hat alles eine Vergangenheit' (84), and he presses all those concerned for information about the history of the property; all are content to *not* know. This apparent lack of historical connection becomes the plausible premise for Albert to begin composing the story in his book. En route for Hamburg, he drafts a story about a 'Garten im Norden', a park in the heart of Berlin belonging to a millionaire banker named Albert Klein.²¹

The park is a series of six gardens ranging from a small piece of the Black Forest to a peaceful Japanese garden replete with ceremonial teahouse. This fictionalised Albert Klein is a humanist whose garden is to serve as a meeting place for Germans and foreigners, where they can learn to understand each other better. The garden is 'sorgfältig durchdacht' and 'voller Symbolik' (98), a place designed for meditation and peaceful

²¹ Kleeberg transports the real 'Musée Albert Kahn' near Paris to Berlin.

reflection. Possessing almost magical powers, 'der Garten hatte ihm Ruhe geschenkt. Alles war richtig hier und gut' (100). Two words symbolise the garden's structure and function simultaneously: 'Schönheit und Ratio' (101). This idyllic spot within a modern metropolis counters the ugliness and insanity about to possess the city beyond its walls. Symbolically, the narrator Albert Klein attempts to craft a space within history that can follow a different course than that laid out for Germany in history books: 'anders als das, was außenherum ist... Aber er wird es beeinflussen, er wird es verändern' (116).

Berlin's barren landscape as it is embodied in this contested tract of land resonates with Albert's own feelings of displacement and rupture:

das warme Herbstlicht der konservativen und ewigen Metropole, in der die Gegenwart nichts anderes ist als die Einschüsse auf einem alten Webmuster, wo alle Metamorphosen noch den Kern, den Schimmer ihres Ursprungs tragen. Der Horror vor dem Extrem, vor der Stunde Null, vor der respektlos präpotenten Revolution des Völlig-Neuen. (129)

The fictionalised garden serves metaphorically to link the narrator with an image of Germany to which he wishes the real nation could aspire. He infuses his fictional self with the same lack of understanding for Germany's complicated historical processes, and permits his character to live out a type of utopian fantasy. The 'fictional' Klein bought the property for his garden during World War I as a reaction against the war, whose purpose he could not comprehend. He thus attempts to create a space 'without walls' and to break down the barriers that have led to historical misunderstandings: 'Es geht darum, die Menschen, die Kulturen miteinander kommunizieren zu lassen, einander kennenzulernen, um einander zu verstehen und den Haß und das Mißtrauen abzubauen, die die direkte Konsequenz mangelnden Wissens sind' (115). Regrettably, Klein must realise that his own wealth, that money alone, is not sufficient to promote peace 'solange die Köpfe der Leute zubetoniert sind' (218). The result is that influential politicians use Klein's garden for secret political meetings (for example, in March 1930) in order to try and save the Weimar Republic from falling into Nazi hands. At this juncture it is clear that the Albert Klein of the frame is attempting to alter history with his book. In addition to the garden, Klein also creates stipends designed to help promising young intellectuals gain 'ein internationales Bewußtsein' (403).

The structure of a novel within a novel allows Kleeberg to articulate a different view of the Weimar period, while acknowledging simultaneously the legacy of this past era. The Weimar Berlin in which the fictional Albert Klein resides is a city of enormous social potential, one which readers hope will not follow the destiny of the historical city. In crafting his imagined geographic space, both Kleeberg and his fictional narrator allow historical characters to appear: Joseph Roth and Lassalle figure prominently. Additional individuals take on a new dimension, one contrary to their legacy:

the philosopher Martin Heidegger is a committed democrat, and Richard Wagner a composer of popular music. Much in the same way that Peter Gay has underscored the importance of the 'outsider',²² be it as Jew or avant-garde artist, for the powerful potential of the Weimar Republic, Kleeberg actually allows these outsiders to play the vital role denied them in the course of German history.

Despite the utopian goals of the narrator Klein and the philanthropic aims of his fictionalised character, the Germany created in his book still falls prey to many of the disasters of the twentieth century. Two of Klein's close associates form alliances with the Nazi Party. He suffers financially, not only because of the world economic situation, but also because he has too many close contacts among the Social Democrats. Ultimately the Nazis do gain control of the government, the Reichstag burns, and Albert Klein the narrator appears incapable of halting the progress of history. Despite the best intentions, history will not allow itself to be deterred. Bill Niven argues that Kleeberg's novel 'tests German history against the hypothesis of a possible alternative development and fails to reverse it',²³ an interpretation that ignores the narrator's refusal to give up his utopian aims. The narrating Albert stubbornly presses on with his project: 'eine schöne Geschichte erzählen, gegen das Vergessen, für die Kontinuität, eine Geschichte von mir, so wie ich gerne wäre, ein Idealbild' (490).²⁴ The fascinating element of this book is Kleeberg's ability to give readers a sense of what could have been, presenting a 'civilizing utopia' in the decidedly unenlightened north.²⁵ Both the fictional Albert Klein and Albert Klein the narrator think that it is possible for Hitler's name to be erased from history. As the fictional book draws to a close in 1934, the fictional Albert Klein contemplates fleeing to Prague. It turns out that this fictional Klein is a Jew, who loses control of his bank, his property and his garden.²⁶ This twist is a complete surprise to the narrating Albert, who thought he was injecting himself into the story: 'die Geschichte mit großem 'G' hat mich eingeholt, überrollt' (514). Whereas the novel appears to take on a life of its own, proving that history cannot be controlled, readers soon learn that this plot twist is essential to sustain Klein's utopia. It is when the Nazis are poised to assume power that Albert as narrator considers abandoning

²² Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture. The Outsider as Insider*, New York 2001.

²³ Bill Niven, 'Literary Portrayals of National Socialism in Post-Unification German Literature', *German Culture and the Uncomfortable Past: Representations of National Socialism in Contemporary Germanic literature*, ed. Helmut Schmitz, Aldershot 2001, p. 26.

²⁴ The narrator's constant re-assessment and re-affirmation of his project are prompted by repeated visits from the antiquarian book dealer, who interjects his own objections to the story at various junctures. These objections are to serve as warnings to the narrator, that on the one hand it is difficult to alter history, but also that, on the other, what he writes could indeed change history.

²⁵ Schütz, 39.

²⁶ Niven, p. 25, criticises this narrative strain, claiming that the 'alternative' tradition upon which the fable is based is a 'German-Jewish tradition, and thus part of the very heritage the Germans aim to destroy'.

his project, for as he explains to the antiquarian: 'Meine Geschichte hört an diesem Tag auf. Sie können nicht verlangen, daß ich munter weitererzähle, was danach passiert ist. Das steht im Geschichtsbuch' (516). Though the narrator is unaware of his Jewish ancestry, his comments here reflect the all-too-well-known outcome of the Nazi accession to power.

As the novel concludes, Kleeberg brings his story full-circle to the present of 1995. The empty property in the middle of Berlin, on which Albert's father and cousin had been speculating, actually belongs to Albert's family. The antiquarian's prophecy becomes reality as everyone learns that the Albert Klein the narrator created is really the narrator's grandfather. While the narrator must grasp that he has made this history transpire, he also views it as an opportunity to begin the garden again and reconstruct the utopian ideals that were its foundation.²⁷

The novels of Delius, Schneider and Kleeberg tie an exploration of individual identity to the twentieth-century history of the German nation, as it is embedded and embodied in Berlin's urban topography. Kleeberg's novel argues this point most convincingly, underscoring the close relationship of topography, architecture and society in the construction of city identity, nowhere more obvious than in Berlin:

Wenn man Städte einschätzen will, sind vor allem drei Aspekte hilfreich: die Topografie, in die sie gestellt sind, die baulichen Zeugnisse ihrer Geschichte, das heißt der Geschichtsstrom in ihren Mauern, und ihre Struktur, also die planende Hand, die sie einteilt. Diese planende Hand aber ist zugleich Ausdruck der politischen und gesellschaftlichen Konstellationen, innerhalb derer Stadtentwicklung sich abspielt. (145)

As each text highlights the multiple levels of history present in Berlin's empty centre, and each protagonist is required to grapple with his own connection to German history, it becomes clear that the individual cannot divorce himself from national identity. Moreover, in composing open-ended texts, these authors avoid providing their readers with any type of closure. There is no definitive answer to questions of German identity in the Berlin Republic. The desire for closure is futile, for it denies the very essence of history as a continuous act. The question of continuity is important not only in forming the narrative framework for all three novels; it is the very essence of the debates about the construction of Berlin's topography.

²⁷ Here Niven, *ibid.*, concedes that the garden may 'serve as a means of creating harmony after the divisions of the Cold War, another of Germany's negative legacies'.