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Book Review

Ruderal City: Ecologies of Migration, Race, and Urban Nature in Berlin

by ***Bettina Stoetzer***

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Reviewed by H. Glenn Penny, UCLA

Bettina Stoetzer, *Ruderal City: Ecologies of Migration, Race, and Urban Nature in Berlin*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2022. 352 pages.

This ethnography tells two related stories. Bettina Stoetzer is interested in exploring places in Berlin's ruderal, or unplanned and wild, spaces, where life happens unbeknownst to many of Berlin's officials and most of its residents. There are, in fact, a great variety of unregulated urban spaces, such as corners of public parks and forests, which people have been using to grow food, socialize, participate in unregulated commerce, and promote new businesses. Some resourceful people have, in short, found ways to live alternative lives on the edges of Berlin's regulated society, and through that process, they have transformed a variety of overlooked spaces into personal or social places. In part, as Stoetzer explains in her first chapter, those actions followed the precedents set by the so-called "rubble women," who rebuilt Berlin after World War II, and the many other individuals' reappropriations of its public spaces, necessitated by the succession of ruptures during and after the war. Most of what she engages, however, took place long after the city was rebuilt, divided, and then (re)unified and (re)ordered in the 1990s, and many of her descriptions of people's actions during the first decades of the twenty-first century conform to what Michel de Certeau identified as 'tactics' in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980). Since beginning her fieldwork in 2007, she not only encountered a great variety of people finding their own ways in and around the city, she also began engaging with their mental maps and varied interests, many of which aligned poorly with official regulations and common comportment. Instead, the centers of their worlds turned intriguingly around the city's margins and its peripheries—some of which were in the heart of the metropolis. Others, like those that appear in her delightful final chapter, were in Brandenburg's forests. This makes for fantastic reading.

At the same time, Stoetzer devoted a lot of energy to reading and interacting with political activists, and she is keen to use her ruderal ethnographies to throw light on racism and race relations in twenty-first-century Germany. "Colonial legacies and contemporary racial injustices," she wants us to understand, "materialize not only in bodies but also in relations to land" (xi). Consequently, most of the resourceful actors in her stories, those

with whom she spends a lot of time, are immigrants, migrants, refugees, or their descendants, who have faced hardships in Germany and elsewhere. Their challenges in and around Berlin have forced some of them into the ruderal spaces that interest Stoetzer, where their creativity and ingenuity have allowed alternative lives to bloom. In some cases, as with the wonderful story of the Berlin Treehouse that took shape in Kreuzberg during the 1980s, with which she opens the book, her tales turn around individuals driven to change their environments, their families, and then, in many of her stories, their immediate or even extended communities. While in other examples, such as the now celebrated Thai Park, located in the once innocuous Preußenpark in Wilmersdorf, in former West Berlin, a few families' spontaneous gatherings developed into an informal market and community that has since become incredibly popular with Berliners far beyond its originators. It even has a [website](#) for tourists, as well as Instagram and Facebook pages, and has long been a commonplace in most guidebooks to the city. As a result, while Stoetzer goes to great pains to identify injustices in modern Germany, she argues that “these landscapes of exclusion and violence could also become the very grounds upon which alternative futures are forged” (ix).

Stoetzer demonstrates that “ruderal worlds constitute an ecology of unexpected neighbors in the city” and that many of Berlin’s “parks and forests have . . . become sites of contestation over migrant rights and appropriate relations to the urban environment” (5). In all these contestations, race and racism are always already present, both in the legacies of the Nazi past and new forms of white supremacy at large in Europe and Germany today. Yet if Stoetzer succeeds wonderfully with her ethnography of ruderal spaces and her exploration of the agency of some people of color who find themselves on the margins of German society, her attempt to force those people and their stories into colonial logics is overdetermined. It often requires her to rely on binaries between reductive analytical categories such as “white” and “non-white” Germans, and especially between the constructed category of “white Germans” and new non-white and non-European immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, all of whom she uncritically lumps together as ‘others’. That tendency to use unitary descriptive categories as analytical categories leaves her with rather blunt instruments for unpacking the many poignant and complex situations she encountered in Berlin. That includes even her efforts to engage “the embodied effects of multiple forms of racism and the ways in which white supremacy and histories of violence and inequality inscribe themselves onto urban landscapes” (12).

Nevertheless, there is much to learn from this book about Berlin’s landscapes and its human and non-human inhabitants. Stoetzer reminds us, for example, about the mountains of rubble that lie under many of Berlin’s green spaces, including some fourteen rubble hills in the city. She reminds us too about the many ways in which Berliners became plant experts as they sought to survive in the years immediately after the war. The city’s officials, we are told, imported trees and other plants to re-green the city. Birch and oak trees, we learn, were part of the Berlin Airlift’s deliveries; reforestation was a top priority. And yet, alongside that planning, “unexpected lives” continued to grow out of the rubble even as uninvited plants played a role in regreening the city far beyond the forty protected nature areas city administrators supported in their efforts to “improve the quality of urban life by fostering a ‘diversity of nature’ and heterogeneous landscapes in the city” (62).

Given her interest in heterogeneity, integration, and refugees, it is striking that Stoetzer fails to engage the diversity of migrants who became Berliners during this

formative postwar period, including refugees from across Central and Eastern Europe who were just as unexpected and even uninvited as many of the plants she describes. That mixing and accommodation of difference, not to mention the many tensions that accompanied it, was surely integral to the unfolding history of the ruderal city that follows in her book. One can imagine that many of these refugees brought their own ideas about nature to Berlin, and that migrants and refugees from places such as Hungary grew what other Berliners likely regarded as an inordinate number of peppers in ruderal spaces before planting them more systematically in their summer garden plots in the Schrebergärten, which the city administrators organized as Berlin re-emerged from the rubble. By 2022, Stoetzer tells us, there were 880 Schrebergärten in Berlin and a total of some 71,000 plots. All of them are owned by the city, leased by people, and governed by rules and regulations that often led (and continue to lead) to both collaborations and tensions over cooking with Hungarian peppers, Thai spices, and many other ingredients. Not unlike sports teams, which have seen so much attention in the scholarship on immigration, these ‘garden cites’, she tells us, became sites for integration during those early decades.

During her research, Stoetzer was able to explore the “multicultural gardens” that Berlin Senate had endorsed for this purpose. Those established garden colonies and their decades of incremental integration, however, interest Stoetzer much less than the spaces that show “how local gardeners produce ecologies and socialities that do not neatly fit into (neo)liberal models of migration and multicultural diversity” (71). These alternative “gardeners,” she argues, “create everyday forms of ‘ecological care’ . . . that are not easily recognized as political within the expert apparatuses of planning, policy-making, media, and science” (71). For that reason, she believes that they have more to teach us about the range of tactics people used to get around state-sponsored strategies and their cumbersome bureaucracies, which many newcomers found, and continue to find, difficult or impossible to navigate.

Instead of waiting to be granted a costly city garden, Stoetzer realized, some people simply took the initiative to make one. In many ways, she explains, seeking their freedom to do that on the city’s margins was a logical tactic for people who felt marginalized—particularly for those people who are marked as “culturally and physically other in German society” (99). For many of them, transforming marginal spaces was part of making their own places in Berlin. Indeed, Stoetzer is at her best when she underscores points like this: “gardening practices provide heterogeneous tools for creating connections and solidarities among people, plants, animals, seeds, and land” (99). She demonstrates that repeatedly. Yet at the same time, she is perhaps at her weakest when she relies on constructed binary categories to argue, for example, that the migrants’ gardens “explicitly challenge existing white German standards of how to inhabit urban nature” (99). While a unitary group of “white Germans” with homogenous standards is her favorite straw man (her examples are overwhelmingly male), its existence is only asserted, never demonstrated, and she makes no attempt to either engage the constructed character of that category or to disaggregate it.

As a result, she leaves little room for the many and varied interactions among varieties of white and non-white Berliners or transformations in their respective expectations and standards in the analytical portions of her book, even though she shows that both have occurred in the Thai Park and other public places. If, for instance, its originators broke many municipal rules by gathering, preparing, and selling food, and gambling in this location, it nevertheless became a favorite of Berliners and visitors whom

Stoetzer categorizes as “white Germans.” Similarly, there was little rejection of cultural difference among the many “Germans” whom one of her interlocutors noted learned to barbeque in open spaces, not only in their gardens, but also at markets, during festivals, and in designated public spaces, by watching and participating in what became a common activity for many Turkish immigrants and Turkish Germans (158-61).

Imitation, as the saying goes, is the greatest form of flattery. Unfortunately, Stoetzer has subordinated understanding such processes of adaptation, collaboration, emulation, and exchange that have been transforming Germany for decades, and which continued to transform Berlin throughout her study, as new waves of immigrants and refugees from the global south mixed with earlier waves of refugees, guest workers, their descendants, and millions of new arrivals from the former Soviet Union. As Muhterem Aras, who became the first woman and the first Muslim to be elected President of the Baden-Württemberg Landtag in 2016, wrote in the book she co-authored with the Tübingen ethnologist Hermann Bausinger (*Heimat. Kann die weg?* Tübingen 2019), there have been many such dialogical interactions at the centers as well as on the margins of German society. Moreover, for Bausinger, who began his career studying these processes among postwar refugees around Stuttgart in the decades following World War II, and who continued his studies through the subsequent waves of migrants, immigrants, and refugees up to his death in 2021, the kinds of processes animating Stoetzer’s narratives have long been part of German history. In that sense, her book is a welcome addition to this ever-growing literature, one that does a great deal to enhance our understandings of the history of everyday life in the centers and the margins of German cities.