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Here in Berlin by Cristina García (review)

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Fiction and Film

García, Cristina. *Here in Berlin*. Counterpoint, 2018. Pp. 224. ISBN 978-1-64009-108-5.

Individual and collective memories have a special resonance in Cristina García's novels. *Here in Berlin*, her seventh and innovative novel, is set in contemporary Berlin. An unnamed Visitor who closely resembles the author, a *flâneur*, slowly gains the confidence of ordinary berliners when she learns the German language. She records random voices of older individuals who are burdened by the trauma of having witnessed—or have a close relative who has—the rise and fall of the Third Reich. Like ghosts gasping for air, they are eager to inscribe their voices in history before it is too late. Slowly, they trust her, realizing that when one does not belong to a place, or is a newcomer, things may reveal themselves. They might elude those who are accustomed to their surroundings.

Here in Berlin maintains the plurality of voices the reader had encountered in the author's previous highly acclaimed novels such as *Dreaming in Cuban*, *The Agüero Sisters*, *A Handbook to Luck* and *King of Cuba*. This postmodern device has become a trademark of the novelist; there is no single truth since the interpretation of historical events is contingent on lived experiences. The novel starts with a Prologue and is divided into four sections: The Flaming Common, Invisible Bodies, War Fugues, Last Rites, and ends with an Epilogue. It presents itself as a conversation with history. The Visitor, presumably, asks questions to ordinary berliners but the reader does not hear her, although the reader feels her presence. Having established a rapport they address her with terms of endearment such as "Kind Visitor," "Dear Visitor," "liebe" (love), "schatzi" (darling).

García's Berlin is not populated exclusively by Aryans. The reader encounters a cadre of diasporic and displaced peoples who have found their way to the German city. They are outsiders due to their birth, race or religion. The author records primarily their stories about life under the Third Reich and the aftermath. One Jewish woman recounts her experience buried in a sarcophagus for thirty-seven days to avoid death. Others reminisce about their daily lives of fear and persecution during the war as they tried to hide their Jewish identities. One also finds gypsies—another persecuted group. There are as well references to concentration camps, such as Terenzin and Sachsenhausen. Occasionally, some recall the lives and actions of the ruling class such as the presence of Nazi's sex clubs, the sinking by a torpedo of a lavish pleasure ship for Nazi loyalists, or the kidnapping of Aryan-looking children from Poland and Russia to increase the master race. The fascination with this period in history carries on for some time in a character working at the KaDeWe department store with an uncanny resemblance to Eva Braun—a *doppelgänger* of Hitler's mistress.

There is an abundance of allusions to losing or gaining vision, amnesia, and recalling. In fact, many of the individuals the Visitor meets are patients of an African ophthalmologist who treats those suffering of worsening eyesight, cataracts or glaucoma. Stories of the past hunt the city. Some cannot escape them; others respond with a deliberate amnesia choosing to move forward. Perhaps not surprisingly, García's Berlin is populated by an inordinate number of Cubans. The reader has become accustomed to the author dealing one way or another with her native island. In this novel it is even plausible given Germany's alliance with General Francisco Franco during the Spanish Civil War of 1936–39 and, more recently, the Cuban Revolution's affiliation with the Soviet Bloc. Other stories—such as that of Ernesto Cuadra, a Cuban who was kidnapped and spent five months as prisoner in a German submarine—seem to fall in the realm of fantasy. One night at age sixteen Cuadra was guarding a Cuban factory property of Dr. Faustino Buendía when he was taken to a brothel—at this point the reader starts making connections with García Márquez' magical realism—and is captured by German seamen who were roaming the coasts of Cuba. To his family's disbelief—but not to García Márquez readers—he will later reappear and would maintain contacts with one of his former captors. In his return to Berlin the Visitor meets him. Other Cubans had found their way to Berlin during the Cuban Revolution via its

proxy war in Angola, or taking advantage of Cuba's relations with the Soviet Bloc. The allure of the German city attracts Dr. Molina, a descendant of a Spaniard who migrated to Cuba during the Second World War. These sections are interpolated with occasional words in Spanish.

The novel makes use of visual elements in the form of old black and white photographs that complement the written text. Significantly, the first one is an illegible map of Berlin, preparing the reader for the daunting search the Visitor is about to undertake. Other photos make evident the material devastation of the city after its many bombardments and corroborate the verbal testimonies of the witnesses. One of them captures a woman seemingly directing traffic, but absurdly, there are no cars, only debris and destruction.

Here in Berlin is as much about Berlin as it about the Visitor. When a friend from a New Jersey university she calls "A"—a fellow Cuban and a writer like her—tells her about Berlin she is immediately intrigued and comes to the city in search of a story. As time goes on she will lose herself to others' stories and Berlin begins to alter her. Rather than war which had attracted her originally, she is more interested in Eros and pathos. Her quest has become autobiographical recognizing that she is also personally familiar with trauma. Those sections of the novel devoted to her are in the third person, unlike those of the witnesses she interviews who rely on the first person. Ultimately, he has become a character.

Like written history itself, this novel is fragmentary—elusive shreds of memory that acquire meaning as the puzzle is weaved together in the novel. Given the defining impact of the Second World War as a historical event in the twentieth century, it is not surprising to find the existence of an abundance of scholarly and artistic production available on the subject. García acknowledges some of them as inspiration, such as Werner Sollors, Timothy Snyder, Anthony Beevor, W. G. Sebald and Wendy Lower. This novel is a welcome addition to this tragic era. It is a well-written piece of fiction that grasps the reader's attention. Berlin, like many modern and vibrant cities, is deceiving. The author reveals its complexity. Its history is both local and universal and also very personal, thus revealing the commonality of human experience.

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Hegstrom, Valerie, editor; Larson, Catherine, translator. *El muerto disimulado/Presumed Dead*. Liverpool UP, 2018. Pp. 327. ISBN 978-1-78694-072-8.

Fuchs, Barbara, editor; Racz, G. J., translator. *The Golden Age of Spanish Drama*. Norton, 2018. Pp. 612. ISBN 978-0-39392-362-9.

There has been renewed interest in Spanish Golden Age performance studies with an increasing focus on presenting renowned dramaturgs and their works to Anglophone audiences. Edited and translated works by Valerie Hegstrom, Catherine Larson, and Barbara Fuchs and G. J. Racz complement the rich tradition of early modern Spanish performance studies and expand this scholarly area reaching out to more readers and viewers not necessarily familiar with Peninsular Spanish studies. *El muerto disimulado/Presumed Dead* and *The Golden Age of Spanish Drama* invite any reader—particularly those with no prior experience or expertise in the area of Spanish drama—to delve into the world of performances and traditions of the sixteen and seventeenth-century Iberian Peninsula. While Hegstrom's edition focuses on a single play written by Ángela de Azevedo, Fuchs's edition presents an overview of the Golden Age Spanish drama. Both editions provide the reader with thorough and essential information about the evolution of performances, dating from the oral tradition to the making of a comedia. Hegstrom includes information about the Spanish drama and its influences—both historical and literary—in Portugal and presents the reader with Spanish and English versions of Azevedo's *El muerto disimulado*. The edition by Fuchs focuses on several seminal plays of the era and their significance in cultural, literary, and performance studies. Both editions would be valuable in literature in translation courses,